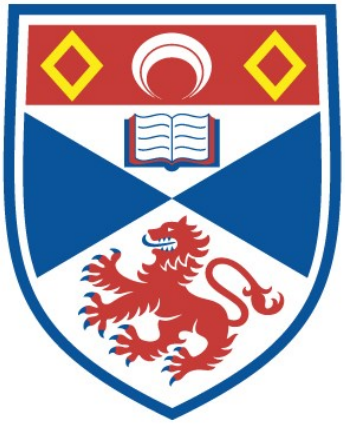
PEASANT MANDARINS : FOUR POETS NEGOTIATING TRADITIONS AFTER THE EMPIRE

Nils Eskestad

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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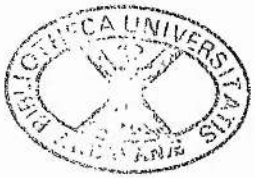
Peasant Mandarins: Four Poets Negotiating Traditions after the Empire

by Nils Eskestad

Thesis submitted for the higher degree of Ph.D. at the University of St. Andrews.

28 April 1999



Thesis Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Les Murray and Tony Harrison as important figures in contemporary English–language poetry. Writing in the aftermath of Empire, these four poets are all linked by being in some sense 'cultural provincials' who have sought to engage with an Anglocentric canon of English literature. The need to stay true to their indigenous regional, vernacular experiences as "peasant" poets has played a crucial role in the forming of their respective voices. However, this study also stresses the need to see Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison as writers whose literary sensibility was formed during the late imperial period. Their formal education is discussed not merely as a culturally estranging experience, but also as a factor contributing to their strong sense of poetic tradition.

It is through their negotiations across a broad cultural spectrum that these poets have turned their perceived cultural marginality into a strength. As "Peasant Mandarins", they have sought to balance their local cultural pieties with a sense of wider artistic autonomy that is not tied to a particular local or sectarian affiliation. Consequently, rather than examining Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison merely as regional or national poets in a post–colonial context, this thesis draws attention to their role as international brokers of a shared, but polycentric and heterogeneous, tradition of poetry in English.

While intended as a comparative study, *Peasant Mandarins: Four Poets Negotiating Traditions after the Empire* remains alert to the different cultural experiences of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, and stays true to the distinguishing features of their respective voices. Four main chapters discuss each poet individually, while the Introduction and Conclusion assess their collective role as "Peasant Mandarins", linking them to the general climate of contemporary English–language poetry.

I, Nils Eskestad, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 99.000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 1995 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September 1996; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1995 and 1998.

date: 9 April 1999 signature of candidate:

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph. D. in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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This thesis is the result of my three years as a research student at the University of St. Andrews. I am indebted to everyone at the School of English, staff as well as fellow post–graduates, who contributed to making my stay such a rewarding and pleasurable experience. Andrew Nash and Rich Pagano in particular ensured that the basement of Castle House was a stimulating place to be. Also the secretaries at the School of English, Mrs. Dorothy Black, Mrs. Frances Mullan, Mrs. Jane Sommerville and Miss Jill Gamble, have been extremely helpful. Most of all, I owe a great debt to my supervisor at St. Andrews, Professor Robert Crawford, whose dedication, advice and criticism have been a constant source of inspiration.

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Nils Eskestad

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine four of the leading poets currently writing in English, namely Seamus Heaney from Northern Ireland, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean, Les Murray from Australia, and Tony Harrison from Northern England. Roughly belonging to the same generation, these four poets all write in the aftermath of Empire, and are linked by being in some sense 'cultural provincials'.[1] In addition, literary commentators have often referred to them collectively as key figures in an international "superleague" of contemporary poetry.[2] To a great extent, such a comparison has been corroborated by the mutual interest which the poets themselves have taken in each other's work.[3] Generally, however, critics still tend to assess Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison individually, typically seeing them against the background of their respective native or national traditions.[4] While a handful of essays investigating the similarities between two or more of these poets have appeared in recent years,[5] no full–length comparative study has been made to date. *Peasant Mandarins: Four Poets Negotiating Traditions after the Empire* seeks to redress that lack.

First of all, it is necessary to elaborate on why Heaney, Walcott, Murray and

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1 An ideal term does not exist. Words like 'provincial', 'regional', and even 'national', are tainted by hierarchic metropolitan attitudes, and must be used with caution: hence the inverted commas.

2 See for instance, Blake Morrison's 'Platonic Justice — Poems from the Colonial Fringe', *The Age Monthly Review*, 5.5, September 1985, p. 4, and 'Dialect Does It', *London Review of Books*, 5 December 1985, pp. 14–5. See also Douglas Dunn, 'Big Man's Music: Les Murray's Metric', in *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale, NSW: Kardoorair Press, 1997), pp. 75–7, as well as the introductory remarks to 'Poets' Round Table: 'A Common Language'', a joint interview with Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Les Murray, and Derek Walcott, conducted by Michael Schmidt, in *PN Review*, 15.4, 1989, pp. 39–47.

3 See for example Seamus Heaney, 'The Murmur of Malvern', *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989); Derek Walcott, 'Crocodile Dandy', *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998); and Les Murray, 'A Music of Indirection', *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Points, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997). See also 'Poets' Round Table', ibid. Although Harrison is not included in this interview, Heaney points to him as an English poet "who shares the kinds of things that we have shared tonight in discussion" (p. 45).

4 See for instance Andrew Murphy,*Writers and Their Work: Seamus Heaney* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1996); Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993); Robert D. Hamner, *Derek Walcott*, rev. ed. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993); Penelope Nelson, *Notes on the Poetry of Les A. Murray* (Sydney: Methuen, 1978); Joe Kelleher, *Writers and Their Work: Tony Harrison* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1996).

5 The chapter entitled 'Barbarians' in Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) discusses all of these four poets. See also Douglas Dunn's *The Topical Muse: On Contemporary Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool Classical Monthly, 1990), which examines the poetry of, among others, Harrison and Heaney; and Stan Smith, 'Darkening English: Post–Imperial Contestations in the Language of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott', *English*, 43.175, Spring 1994.

Harrison are worth considering together. Coming from areas that became identifiable under the Empire as provincial or colonial margins, the sense of place plays an important role in their works: opposing the strictures of 'provinciality', each of these poets has forged a voice that draws on his particular regional heritage. But at the same time, it would be misleading to see them exclusively as regional or national poets. While firmly rooted culturally, their works exhibit a cosmopolitan range of influences. Indeed, it is through an amalgamation of available languages and literary exemplars that each of them has turned his perceived cultural marginality into a strength. On one level, as Robert Crawford argues, Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison belong to a generation of poets who have assumed — somewhat provocatively — the role of "barbarians", turning to their respective varieties of regional or national English to invoke a sense of place, and to challenge the idea of a standardised, metropolitan–dominated tradition of English literature.[6] However, they also rely on that tradition to a great extent, assimilating its art language and placing themselves within the context of the established Western canon. In this way, wishing to explore how these poets can be seen to draw on a wide cultural spectrum, I have chosen to refer to them collectively as "Peasant Mandarins", a phrase originally coined by Les Murray to describe his own role as a writer.

Clearly, there is something self–contradictory about this term: if "peasant" implies staying true to one's indigenous vernacular experience, and resisting the hegemony of a standardised, Anglocentric English–language culture, "mandarin" conjures up entirely different connotations. A mandarin we normally associate with the élitism of an official, empowered word–culture, and — especially in a twentieth–century context — with technocratic, metropolitan values. In the specific context of literary criticism, notions of the mandarinate were first introduced during the 1930s. For instance, in *Enemies of Promise* (1938), Cyril Connolly spoke of a "Mandarin style" in English literature, which was "Ciceronian" in diction and syntax, and which rested on an underlying assumption that both writer and reader were "in possession of a classical education and private income".[7] And in his collection of essays from 1934, *Men Without Art*, Wyndham Lewis described T. S. Eliot as a "mandarin", pointing to his dominant position as spokesperson of poetic tradition and literary culture.[8] In Lewis's case, "mandarin" did not refer so much

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6 Robert Crawford, ibid.

7 Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938; rev. ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 17–8.

8 Wyndham Lewis, 'T. S. Eliot: The Pseudo–Believer', *Men Without Art* (1934; Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), p. 55.

to matters of literary style and rhetoric, as to the writer's role as educator of taste, as upholder of social and literary values. These implications were later reiterated in 1947, when John Hayward deployed the term to address literature's "civilizing mission among the literate masses", its need to "impose its values...and insist on their supreme importance".[9] Finally it should be noted that in a post–colonial context, "mandarin" has been used to account for the "intellectual authority" of a writer like V. S. Naipaul, as in Rob Nixon's *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin.*[10]

In the present study, "Peasant Mandarins" is used to account for a sense of cultural in–between–ness which is central to the poetry of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison. On one level of meaning, the term relates to the artistic dilemma of being a highly educated and literary writer who at the same time seeks to give voice to an inherited, unofficial vernacular culture. But, as I will demonstrate, there is also something enabling about this in–between–ness. As "peasants" who have appropriated an art language administered by the centre, and made it their own in order to represent their vernacular republics, these poets have come to act in a wider cultural context of poetic tradition. Indeed, a notion of mandarinism has enabled them to balance their local cultural pieties with a wider sense of artistic autonomy that is not tied to a particular regional or sectarian affiliation. This was expressed, for instance, in the title sequence from *Station Island* (1984), in which Heaney dealt with his own Catholicism in the light of Northern Ireland sectarianism, and felt compelled to question his position as a writer. The poem's concluding section reads as an imaginary dialogue with the ghost of Joyce, who advises the poet: "'The English language/ belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,'"

> Keep at a tangent.
> When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim
>
> out on your own and fill the element
> with signatures on your own frequency.[11]

In this way, evoking the example of Joyce, Heaney reaffirmed his own need for artistic autonomy, and so also pointed to the legitimacy of appropriating — as a Northern Irish

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9 John Hayward, *Prose Literature Since 1939* (London: Longmans Green/ the British Council, 1947), quoted in Geoffrey Hill, 'Of Diligence and Jeopardy', the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17–23 November 1989, p. 1274. See furthermore John Xirox Cooper's use of the term in his *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of* Four Quartets (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). In the above, I am especially indebted to his general discussion of "mandarins" and "the mandarinate" on pp. 33–4.

10 Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

11 Seamus Heaney, 'Station Island, XII', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 268.

Catholic — a literary inheritance passed on by the British Empire. In fact, each of the poets discussed in the following chapters is spurred by a wish to be able to draw on the full range of traditions available to him, and has continually sought to play off local cultural loyalties — the "peasant" — against wider affiliations. In this way they have all achieved some sense of balanced freedom, which is at the core of their artistic mandarinism.

Inevitably, a discussion of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison as "Peasant Mandarins" will reflect the post–colonial debate of the last couple of decades. As a response to the rapid growth of English–language literatures coming out of the former colonies after the Empire, post–colonial criticism has enabled us to revise a received approach to literature that was largely canonical and Anglocentric: notions of multiculturalism, of centre versus periphery, discourse and counter–discourse, have by now become crucial to the way we interpret a given text.[12] However, some of the prevailing assumptions and trends linked to the post–colonial literary debate also need to be questioned. In order to address some of these issues, though, it is necessary first to consider the cultural role and position of 'English Literature' in the course of this century.

Following its wider implementation during the nineteenth century as an independent subject within the education system, 'English Literature' became instrumental in the process of defining a national cultural identity in England.[13] Consequently, it also became a means to promote a sense of Englishness in the colonies. As Gauri Viswanathan demonstrated in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*,[14] English literary studies were introduced as an important part of the 'civilising' process in British India during the mid–nineteenth century. But while having a canon of texts carrying the label "English" helped to consolidate the perceived cultural hierarchy between the centre and the peripheries, distinctions remained subjective, selective, and highly problematic. Recent studies concerned with the invention of 'English Literature' have revealed the

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12 See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post–Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Bruce King (ed.), *New National and Post–Colonial Literatures: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also the Introduction to Francis Barker, Peter Hulme & Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/ Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); and Bart Moore–Gilbert, 'Postcolonial Criticism or Postcolonial Theory?', in his *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London/ New York: Verso, 1997).

13 See Robert Colls & Philip Dodd (eds.), *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); and Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London: Routledge, 1990).

14 Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

extent to which it merely created an *illusion* of a well–defined cultural centre.[15] The readiness with which select Irish writers like Swift and Wilde, or Scots like Robert Burns and Walter Scott, would be assimilated into an 'English' tradition, reveals its inherent disunity. This disunity has often been covered over by the way in which 'English' and 'British' have been — and to some extent still are — used synonymously to refer to the culture of the assumed centre. I shall return to this dilemma later in my introduction, but suffice it to say here that one of the *effects* of inventing an English literary tradition seems to have been the strengthening of a cultural climate which was marked by an awareness of difference and otherness, by notions of centre versus periphery. Thus, assessing the development of a national consciousness in nineteenth–century England, Robert Young refers in *Colonial Desire* to the growing influence of academic institutions such as Oxford University, and considers how they promoted a notional, hierarchic separation of "High Culture" and "anthropological culture". This he in turn links to the legacy of Matthew Arnold.[16]

During the twentieth century, an awareness of provinciality and otherness has taken up an increasingly significant place in English–language culture and debate. Particularly with the rise of Modernism, tensions between centre and periphery became more visible as several key figures, such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, were "provincials" who challenged or modified the English cultural centre. Yet, at the same time they also challenged their own provincial inheritance, choosing to work within a European metropolitan context. As Robert Crawford points out in his chapter on 'Modernism as Provincialism':

> The Eliot who had devoted a considerable amount of his early poetry to breaking out of a now decadent and oppressively polite Bostonian milieu, and who had followed Henry James to England and the metropolis, was devoted to incorporating 'provincial' traditions into the central, metropolitan one, strengthening and subtly changing the centre.[17]

After the Second World War, which hastened the dismantling of the British Empire (a process inaugurated by the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921), more and more

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15 See Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*; Robert Crawford (ed.), *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).

16 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire*, Chapters 2 & 3. See also Michael Allen's discussion of provincialism in nineteenth–century English Literature, in 'Provincialism and Recent Irish Poetry: The Importance of Patrick Kavanagh', *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet Press, 1975), pp. 23–36.

17 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 255.

attention has been directed towards the ways in which the peripheries have emerged from the shadow of colonialism, and reacted against a traditionally Anglocentric cultural heritage.

By the late 1950s, the phrase 'Commonwealth Literature' was making its way into the vocabulary of English studies, in an attempt to accommodate and account for an increasingly pluralistic English–language culture. In 1962, for instance, the *Times Literary Supplement* ran a special issue under the heading 'A Language in Common'. This contained several articles on Commonwealth writing, as well as samples of what was awkwardly designated "Common Poetry". In 'The Give–and–Take of English', it was stated that "[o]ne of the most significant developments to have taken place in recent years...is the rise of several regional literatures in English. Already it is as proper to talk of Indian and African literatures (in English) as it is of Canadian or Australian, and all evidence suggests that they will grow in strength and be joined by others."[18] Nevertheless, the author also sought to define the new role and responsibilities of the old imperial centre:

> The future of English, however, is still largely in our hands, in spite of the surprising developments abroad, unless we intend to abdicate responsibility...
>
> Criticism they cannot always expect to meet with at home, but without criticism and the general discussion it prompts, a literature will neither be corrected nor encouraged into displaying its full powers. We are under an obligation to criticize these literatures, with understanding but without leniency (ibid.).

While seeking to acknowledge the growing heterogeneity of English–language literature, subsequent Commonwealth literary criticism has also tended to leave existing problems of Anglocentrism unexamined. Indeed, some early commentators felt that the function of 'Commonwealth Literature' was to serve and strengthen the vitality of a central, dominant tradition of 'English Literature'. In the introduction to his poetry anthology from 1968, *New Voices of the Commonwealth*, Howard Sergeant wrote with reference to T. S. Eliot that "[w]hat may have been backwaters in the past are being transformed into powerful new tributaries to the main stream of English poetry".[19] Generally, though, 'Commonwealth Literature' has been used as a collective reference to writings that were seen as 'other–than–English'. Critical studies in this field have typically approached a vast and diverse body of texts by ordering and examining them according to national or geographical sub–headings, such as 'Indian', 'African', 'West Indian' and

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18 'The Give–and–Take of English', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 August 1962, p. 568.

19 Howard Sergeant (ed.), *New Voices of the Commonwealth* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1968), 'Introduction', p. 17.

'Australian'.[20] Such an approach was clearly inspired by the way in which 'American Literature' had managed to establish itself as a distinct field that was identifiably different from 'English Literature'. Perhaps partly as a result of America's growing cultural domination during and after World War II, 'American Literature' began to be taught as an independent subject in English Departments world–wide. But while this set a precedent, encouraging ex–colonial cultures to compartmentalise and examine their own writings separately, their status in the wider context of English–language literature, and particularly in relation to an 'English' tradition, has remained problematic. Outside their countries of origin, the 'new' national literatures have led a precarious existence in the universities: often considered to be of insufficient literary merit, their evidence has typically been appropriated as marginal texts within 'English Literature', if considered at all. And even with the emergence of courses on 'Commonwealth Literature', the result has arguably been an uneasy bundling together of these bodies of writing.

Exactly where the boundaries between 'Commonwealth Literature' and post–colonial studies should be drawn is difficult to say. An overlap is suggested by the fact that established Commonwealth literary journals — such as *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *ARIEL*, and *World Literature Written in English* — now serve as important venues for post–colonial criticism. Generally, though, the national model often used in 'Commonwealth Literature' has been suppressed in post–colonial studies. As Bruce King notes, post–colonialism can be linked with a time "when the unity of the state is being challenged by other kinds of identification".[21] Similarly, in *The Empire Writes Back* it is stated: "the term 'post–colonial literatures' is...to be preferred...because it points towards a possible study of the effects of colonialism in and between writing in english and writing in indigenous languages in such contexts as Africa and India, as well as writing in other language diasporas".[22]

In this way, the general thrust of post–colonial criticism has been towards a theorising of the whole field. As Gareth Griffiths notes in 1998: "In recent constructions of the post–colonial...the interest in writing from regions other than England and America

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[20] A. L. McLeod (ed.), *The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961); John Press (ed.), *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1965); William Walsh, *Commonwealth Literature* (London/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Bruce King (ed), *Literatures of the World in English* (London: Routledge, 1974); Bruce King, *The New English Literatures — Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* (London: Macmillian, 1980).

[21] Bruce King, 'New Centres of Consciousness: New, Post–colonial and International English Literature', *New National and Post–Colonial Literatures*, p. 7.

[22] Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 24.

which characterized earlier approaches has shifted to an essentially philosophical concern with issues of marginality, subalternity, and agency."[23] This in turn has led to the emergence of certain practices and paradigms which need to be addressed. Arguably, post–colonial criticism has threatened to reduce the function of qualitative literary analysis to a minor exercise in the wider cultural discourse. Among the most influential theorists, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,[24] the tendency has been towards an interdisciplinary approach. Bhabha thus relies heavily on psychoanalysis, while Spivak's cultural criticism branches out to incorporate a vast area of subjects, including feminism, Marxist theory, and deconstruction as well as psychoanalysis.[25] While Bhabha seldom1 engages with specific literary texts, Spivak seeks to collapse the perceived distinctions between literary genres, on the grounds that these reflect the hegemonic methodology of a Western, First World intellectual tradition. In this way, an awareness of specific literary forms has generally been neglected by a theorical discourse which focuses more on a mapping out of cultural attitudes. Poetry in particular seems to have been marginalised in the course of this debate. Common to the works of Said, Bhabha and Spivak is that when they do engage with literary texts, they focus primarily on prose writings.

In his recent collection of essays, *The Deregulated Muse*, Sean O'Brien addressed some of these concerns, commenting on the general impact of Theory upon the current climate of literary criticism:

> There's no denying that the interior complexities of Theory are extensive and fascinating, but to engage with them in detail often means attending more to Theory than were once the primary objects of literary criticism — poetry, fiction, drama. For some this would be a legitimate pursuit, but for a poet interested in understanding the poetry of the times it would seem like one more means of marginalising an art.[26]

But if the treatment of new literatures under a post–colonial international flag has generally

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23 Gareth Griffiths, 'The Post–Colonial Project: Critical Approaches and Problems', *New National and Post–Colonial Literatures*, p. 167.

24 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1, 1985; and *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990); Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988); and 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).

25 See Robert Young's discussions of Said, Bhabha and Spivak in *Colonial Desires*, as well as in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990). See also Peter Childs & R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post–Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997).

26 Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), Introduction, p. 14.

led to a theory–based kind of criticism which neglects the distinct character of the poetic genre,[27] there has in recent decades been another, equally problematic tendency to discuss works in close empirical detail, with a view to placing them within the confines of national traditions.[28] Central to my discussions of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison in the following chapters has been a desire to counter some of these trends. First of all, it is important to acknowledge how the post–war literary climate to which they belong has become increasingly cosmopolitan, reflecting the globalisation of our age. Consequently, *Peasant Mandarins: Four Poets Negotiating Traditions after the Empire* seeks to draw attention to the international links between these four English–language writers. Still, it has also been important for me not to blur the differences between them, and overlook the individual grain of each poet and each culture concerned. In addition, this thesis has been spurred by a wish to engage in a formal appreciation of their poetry. In my analyses I have tried to remain alert to the *aesthetics* as well as the politics of the reading experience; I have sought to maintain a sense that besides its ability to address cultural issues, poetry is a distinct literary medium which relies on musical instinct as well as intellect.

Of course it could be argued that in adopting such an approach, there is a danger of falling between two stools. The risk is worth taking, though, if we are to understand both the shared conditions and individual accents of these poets. Furthermore, the need to negotiate between the historical, social forces which have helped form the voices of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, and the formal, qualitative aspects of the poetry itself, reflects their own concerns as 'cultural provincials' writing in the aftermath of Empire. While continually alert to their position as "peasant" poets, their own criticism tends to focus on traditional questions of poetic craft. Indeed, as I will point out, a strong belief in aesthetic value and poetic worth forms an essential part of their role as artistic mandarins. Stressing this dual aspect of Heaney's position as a writer in *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, Bernard O'Donoghue thus also argued for a balanced methodology, in which an historical/ biographical bias is tempered by a "formalist kind of

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27 See for instance Michael Parker & Roger Starkey (eds.), *New Casebooks: Postcolonial Literature — Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998); Dennis Walder, *Post–Colonial Literatures in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The absense of post–colonial studies dedicated to the discussion of poetry alone is symptomatic of the field.

28 See for instance Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1984); Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott — Memory As Vision:* Another Life (London: Longman, 1978); Bruce King (ed.), *West Indian Literature* (1979; rev. ed. London: Macmillan, 1995); Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State: Les Murray and Australian Poetry* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992); and Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (London: Harvester & Wheatsheaf, 1994).

analysis, based on scrutiny of the poetry itself".[29]

In other words, my aim in the following chapters is partly to examine the formal orientations and musical qualities marking these four poets' work. But at the same time, in order to assess properly the ways in which each writer has negotiated a sense of tradition in the light of his perceived cultural marginality, I have sought to combine textual scrutiny with an historical approach, attending to the particular circumstances of the poet's formative experience. In considering cultural aspects of their art, I have found it necessary to resist certain paradigms which stem from post–colonial theory, but have generally come to dominate the overall debate. In exploring the discourse between centre and periphery, post–colonial commentators have tended to stress notions of difference and incompatability. Curiously, this has produced an intellectual climate in which the cultural boundaries and polarities set up by the Empire are maintained, although the perspective has now been reversed. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, for instance, make a case for distinguishing between 'English' and 'english', arguing that such a differentiated spelling would accommodate our understanding of a decolonised and increasingly pluralistic English–language culture:

> In order to focus on the complex ways in which the English language has been used in [post–colonial] societies, and to indicate their own sense of difference, we distinguish...between the 'standard' British English inherited from the Empire and the english which the language has become in post–colonial countries.[30]

A similar sense of polarity informs the works of Said, Bhabha and Spivak. In *Orientalism* as well as in *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, Said explores the ways in which a Western tradition of literary and academic thought has been inextricably linked with the actual politics of European imperialism. Consequently, he argues that the self–articulation of ex–colonial cultures is largely irreconcilable with a Western inheritance. To understand the culture of post–coloniality, he offers a dialectical — or "contrapuntal" — reading, which examines the processes of imperialism on the one hand, and of resistance on the other.[31]

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29 Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), Introduction, p. 3. A similar, balanced approach is also adopted by Sean O'Brien in *The Deregulated Muse* (see p. 14).

30 Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 8.

31 As noted already, it is the same kind of hostility towards a Western scholarly tradition which informs Spivak's multi–disciplinary approach. Even Bhabha's preoccupation with hybridity and dialogism revolves around notions of cultural incompatibility. In 'Signs Taken for Wonders', he thus defines hybridity as "a problematic of colonial representation...that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (p. 154).

In this way, post–colonial literatures have often been treated generically as resistance writing, as something antithetical to the Western canon or to 'English Literature'. While this has been useful in the overall cultural debate, the question remains whether such theoretical paradigms accommodate the full spectrum of post–colonial writings. A principal objection that can be levelled at commentators like Said, Bhabha and Spivak is that they tend to focus on generalised Third–World scenarios such as India and Africa. As Robert Young observes, this has contributed to "a noticeable geographical and historical homogenization of the history of colonialism".[32] Thus, Said's studies hinge on notions of West/ non–West, European/ non–European, and white/ non–white. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he asserts: "On the fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world there is no disagreement. So strongly felt and perceived are the geographical boundaries between the West and its non–Western peripheries that we may consider these boundaries absolute."[33] This is an historical legacy of imperialism, he explains, pointing for example to Rudyard Kipling's mental map of the Empire:

> On one side of the colonial divide was a white Christian Europe whose various countries...controlled most of the earth's surface. On the other side of the divide, there was an immense variety of territories and races, all of them considered lesser, inferior, dependent, subject. 'White' colonies such as Ireland and Australia too were considered made up of inferior humans; a famous Daumier drawing, for instance, explicitly connects Irish whites and Jamaican Blacks (p. 162).

While attacking the discriminatory nature of such "absolute boundaries", Said never addresses the problem of maintaining them in connection with a post–colonial discourse, which in turn threatens to render his own account reductive. Seeing Ireland and Australia in the Third–World context of India and Africa, set up against a White Christian Europe, prevents a critical assessment of the ambiguities marking the post–coloniality of such Second–World situations. Surely, while relegated by a history of English imperialism, indigenous Irish culture is still European and Christian, though with Celtic, pagan roots. Similarly, white Australia differs from Aboriginal Australia in being a settler–culture with a strong (if complex) European heritage. In this connection, it is also important that we distinguish between those post–colonial situations where English is a first language — although in a non–standard variant — and those where English is acquired, having been superimposed upon a living, native language culture. Generally, it can be argued against theorists like Said that they fail to account satisfactorily for the Second–World situations

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32 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 164.

33 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.129.

that have a more ambivalent relationship with the old imperial centre, and for the fact that this ambivalence has produced several post–colonial literatures in English that combine the element of cultural resistance with one of cultural convergence.

But if theorists have made totalising assumptions about the Otherness of post–colonial culture, they also take the unitary nature of the old centre for granted: 'English' and 'British' are still used synonymously, allowing for a flexibility while leaving the "absolute" cultural demarcations unexamined. It is revealing, for instance, how Said refrains from discussing the position of the Scottish and Welsh territories, when mapping out the colonial divide in *Culture and Imperialism*. The only Scottish writer mentioned in the course of this study is Thomas Carlyle, whose essay from 1849, 'The Nigger Question', is seen as "a *linguafranca* for metropolitan Britain...[which] locates England [*sic*] at the focal point of a world also presided over by its power, illuminated by its ideas and culture".[34] Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the problems of operating with a unified cultural centre have been addressed most convincingly in areas of study like Scottish literature, a field which, as Robert Crawford puts it, has been "particularly vulnerable to being subsumed within the English literary tradition with which it was frequently, but not exclusively, engaged".[35]

Both Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* and Cairns Craig's *Out of History* illustrate how a defining, central tradition of 'English Literature' has in fact been riddled by inherent cultural differences since its inception. In this respect, Craig identifies a central principle by which core cultures operate, namely "taking to themselves all significant achievements in the periphery that can be accommodated without too great a stress".[36] Ironically, though, the need for a central tradition that could accommodate the peripheries has to a large extent been promoted by writers and intellectuals who struggled with their own perceived marginality. Crawford thus traces the invention of 'English Literature' as a university subject to the teaching of 'Rhetoric and Belles Lettres' at Scottish tertiary institutions in the eighteenth century. And as Craig points out, the 'English tradition' promoted by T. S. Eliot was one which provided a select number of provincials writing in English (including himself) with a larger continuum, a sense of belonging within one of those identifiable, 'great organic formations' which make up History. With reference to *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Craig observes that

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34 Ibid., p. 123.

35 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 8.

36 Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, p. 19.

according to Eliot, "[t]he real function of Scottish, Irish and Welsh writers is to contribute not to their own culture, which will not have 'a direct impact on the world', but towards the tradition of English literature".[37] This, Craig suggests, has enabled subsequent critics to appropriate a heterogeneous tradition and centre it around English culture, as when F. R. Leavis asserted rather paradoxically in *The Great Tradition* that "[t]he great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad"[38] — two of whom of course are not English. But as Craig explains: "'English' here is poised on the ambiguity of referring to the language or to the culture, and that equivocation, in Leavis as in so many others, becomes the means of enhancing the organic tradition of the core culture by adoption from the peripheries" (p. 19). Other recent studies have also sought to address the problem of dealing with the culture of the centre as a well–defined, homogeneous entity. In a cunning move, Robert Young's *Colonial Desire* applies post–colonial models of hybridity to re–examine nineteenth–century English culture. As he points out: "Englishness...has never been successfully characterized by an essential, core identity from which the other is excluded. It has always, like the Prime Meridian, been divided within itself".[39]

That post–colonial theory has failed in accounting for the disunity of the centre and generally chosen to perpetuate the binaries set up by the Empire, may be linked to the paradox that — like 'Commonwealth Studies' — it appears to have grown out of the Western academic climate to which it is also a reaction. A curious concession to this dilemma is found in *The Empire Writes Back*, where the authors begin by distancing post–colonial thought from a European intellectual tradition, explaining: "The political and cultural monocentrism of the colonial enterprise was a natural result of the philosophical traditions of the European world and the systems of representation which this privileged".[40] As we read on, however, we also learn that "[t]he impetus towards decentring and pluralism has always been present in the history of European thought and has reached its latest developments in post–structuralism". Similarly, while denouncing a Western academic methodology, the works of theorists like Said, Bhabha and Spivak are also to a considerable extent products of that tradition.

In a survey of the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Les Murray and Tony

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37 Ibid., p. 16.

38 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 1; quoted by Craig, ibid., p. 18.

39 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 3.

40 Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 11–2.

Harrison, we must beware of accepting too readily the binaries within which post–colonial theorists tend to operate. While coming from culturally marginalised situations, these poets all have English as a first language, and generally fit uneasily into a non–Western, Third–World context. Thus, in Walcott's case it is important when considering questions of an indigenous Caribbean sensibility, that we acknowledge his white European roots as well as his African slave heritage: as Shabine says in Walcott's poem 'The Schooner *Flight*', echoing the poet's own identity: "I had a sound colonial education,/ I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/ and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."[41] West Indian culture is a creolised culture, and writing off part of your inheritance in order to find your true identity would be like cutting off your right leg to heal a wound. On the other hand, while Harrison may initially strike the reader of this study as being the odd–one–out, coming from England, his case illustrates how the problem of an Anglocentric legacy has not merely been an issue for writers in post–colonial situations, but that its hegemony has had consequences within a national English culture. Indeed it can be argued that among these four poets, Harrison is the most confrontational, when he opposes an exclusive 'high' word–culture by giving voice to his North of England working–class background: "So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy/ your lousy leasehold Poetry".[42]

As will become apparent, in discussing their role as "Peasant Mandarins" negotiating a received sense of tradition, I have found it particularly important to consider the formal schooling which Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have all had. Historically, the 1940s was a decade in which the privilege of further education was made available to a much wider public than had previously been the case. In the United Kingdom, the 1944 Education Act gave working–class children like Tony Harrison — and in Northern Ireland, Catholic students like Heaney — an unprecedented opportunity to proceed to upper–secondary school, and eventually to the university.[43] Furthermore, in 1943 the British government appointed the Asquith Commission to look into the

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41 Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight*', *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 346.

42 Tony Harrison, 'Them & [uz], II', *Selected Poems*, New Expanded Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 123.

43 The 1944 Butler Education Act prefigured the almost identical 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act. See H. C. Dent, *The Education Act 1944: Provisions, Possibilities, and Some Problems* (London: University of London Press, 1944); Brian Jackson & Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (1962; London: Penguin Books, 1966); D. P. Barritt & C. F. Carter, 'Education and the Sectarian Problem', in *The Northern Ireland Problem: A Study in Group Relations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

possibilities of developing tertiary education in the colonies, leading for instance to the establishment of the University College of the West Indies in 1948.[44] Similarly, in Australia the number of universities doubled during the 1940s and 1950s.[45]

In assessing the educational experience of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, the question arises of how much "after Empire" these poets are. Clearly, as the title of my thesis indicates, their mature works were written in the context of post–coloniality. But having said that, it is also important to acknowledge that when these poets were in their formative years, the culture of Empire was still very much in force, and that their formal schooling tended to be traditionally and conservatively Anglocentric. However, as I will point out, while consolidating their experience of a cultural hierarchy set up by the Empire, it was in their schooling and higher education that these poets first confronted in full measure the various loyalties which led to their role as "Peasant Mandarins" striving for a worldwide *polycentric*, rather than simply Anglocentric, literary culture in English.

Instead of adopting antithetical notions of 'english' versus 'English', one of the ways in which Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have faced an Anglocentric heritage has been by questioning the assumed cultural homogeneity of 'English Literature' itself. In an essay from 1976, 'Englands of the Mind', Heaney championed the emergence of a de–standardised, regionalised tradition of national English poetry, examining the works of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill. He pointed out: "The loss of imperial power, the failure of imperial nerve, the diminished influence of Britain inside Europe, all this has led to a new sense of the shires, a new valuing of the native English experience".[46] And in more recent years, Heaney seems to have gone back to reassess the entire canon of English poetry: by pointing to its inherent diversities, and thereby puncturing the myth of a well–defined core culture, he has sought to make it common property within a pluralistic, polycentric English–language tradition.[47] In a similar way, Harrison — initially snubbed by the protectors of 'RP' — has repossessed a poetic inheritance by expressing his allegiance with, among others, Milton, Thomas Gray and Keats.[48] Underlying such appropriations of 'English Literature' is the need, as voiced by

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44 See Rex Nettleford and Philip Sherlock, *The University of the West Indies: A Caribbean Response to the Challenge of Change* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

45 A. G. L. Shaw, *The Story of Australia*, 5th rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp. 296–8.

46 Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations*, p. 169.

47 See for instance Heaney's collection of Oxford Lectures, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995).

48 Tony Harrison, 'Them and [uz], I', *Selected Poems*, p. 122. See for example also 'A Kumquat for John Keats', ibid., pp. 192–5, and 'v.', pp. 235–249.

Murray, to differentiate between an authoritarian culture of Empire, which has been responsible for inventing and promoting the concept of a homogenous, Anglocentric literary canon, and the body of texts incorporated (or even hijacked) in this process.[49]

Generally Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have also been wrestling with an Anglocentric culture of Empire that has seen itself as the rightful heir and proprietor of a classical European heritage.[50] In his long epic poem *Omeros*,[51] Walcott draws a comparison between Homer's Greece and the West Indies, and carves out a role for himself as a Homeric namer of things, as a poet who in a post–colonial, 'Adamic' situation must forge the consciousness of his race. Elsewhere, he has expressed a feeling of being "parallel with some of the Latin poets, coming from my archipelago on the fringe toward the capital".[52] Whether this notion of the Latin poets as writing culturally from the fringe is historically accurate is not really the issue. What is important is that Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have all contested the claims which a centralised, metropolitan culture has made upon a classical heritage. When exploring the post–colonial struggle between centre and periphery, for instance, Murray has traced it back to an old quarrel between Athens and Boeotia, and so placed his own concerns as a vernacular Australian poet within a larger cultural and historical framework.[53]

Common to such re–evaluations is that they enable these poets to appropriate a formal art–language that has been identified with a centralised Western literary heritage. On one level, we may see this as a reaction against the cultural hierarchy of the Empire, as a case of vernacular poets taking over. However, merely to interpret it as a subversive attack on a standardised 'high art' word–culture would be too simplistic. In fact, Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison are as true to a formalised literary language, as they are to their non–standard vernacular heritage. This is crucial to our understanding of their role as negotiators, as poets who are culturally 'in between'. At times, it has led to an artistic self–questioning, as enacted in Harrison's poem 'v.' from 1985, which is essentially a poem about class and word–culture. In it Harrison imagines confronting a young

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49 See 'Poets' Round Table: 'A Common Language'', *PN Review*, op. cit., p. 16.

50 See for instance Thomas Macaulay's account of the superiority of the English civilisation, and its historical affiliations with a Greco–Roman imperial culture, in his 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post–Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 430.

51 Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

52 Derek Walcott, interview with Ned Thomas, *Kunapipi*, 3.2, 1981; reprinted in William Baer (ed.), *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 67.

53 See for instance Les Murray, 'On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter's Boeotia', *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992).

skin–head who has desecrated his parents' grave with graffiti. Seeing him as his own alter ego, Harrison seeks dialogue, but although they have similar backgrounds he has to accept the skin–head's hostility towards — and dismissal of — his educated poetry: "*Ah've told yer, no more Greek... That's yer last warning!*"; "*it's not poetry we need in this class war/ ...Who needs yer fucking poufy words*".[54] The same kind of self–examination can be found in Heaney's and Walcott's earlier works.[55] Generally, though, these poets seem confident about their role as negotiators who have internalised a received poetic tradition.

In fact, this study of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison also proposes to discuss the extent to which their mandarinism has consisted of upholding a sense of tradition in the face of a growing post–colonial hegemony. For instance, in the fifteen lectures given during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Heaney seemed conscious of his double role as a regional writer who at the same time is part of the establishment, speaking from the old centre of 'English Literature'. As if wanting to clear a space for his *literary* concerns from the outset, he warned in his opening lecture against a "late–twentieth–century context of politically approved themes, post–colonial backlash and 'silence–breaking' writing of all kinds".[56] He elaborated:

> poetry is understandably pressed to give voice to much that has hitherto been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual and political life. Which is to say that its power as a mode of redress in the first sense — as agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices — is being appealed to constantly. But in discharging this function, poets are in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means (ibid., pp. 5–6).

In stressing poetry's cultural and linguistic autonomy, Heaney also endorses the possibility of a mandarin, 'high art' poetic tradition that is nonetheless democratic, capable of transcending cultural and historical barriers: "post–colonial backlash" refers critically to a literary climate in which terms like "continuity" and "tradition" have become somewhat suspect, connoting colonial hangover and cultural self–denial. It is understandable that in the course of establishing themselves, the new post–colonial literatures needed to challenge the dominance of an Anglocentric English canon. However, in some instances this process of cultural liberation has led to the creation of equally constricting models of

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54 Tony Harrison, 'v.', *Selected Poems*, pp. 242 & 244.

55 See for instance Heaney's collection *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), and Walcott's 'A Far Cry from Africa', in his *Collected Poems*, pp. 17–8.

56 Seamus Heaney, 'The Redress of Poetry', *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 5.

national or off–centre literatures. As Mark Williams and Alan Riach have pointed out, one of the problems facing ex–colonial writers in the 1960s was how to negotiate the growing cultural dominance of the United States, and the degree to which American writing could be used as a liberating example:

> It was a period when post–war (and largely postmodern) American poetry was exported globally: its formal openness, its easy rhythms, its irresistable vernacular energies turned up in Sydney, Auckland and Vancouver... Yet that American tradition arrived in the 'provinces' not as a break with Tradition as such but as a different tradition... The trouble with this kind of internationalism is that it tends to distort the local scenes into which it is carried by making them conform to borrowed terms and definitions without allowing for their peculiar currency in those places.[57]

Taking this aspect of post–Empire writing into account, I have found it particularly necessary when discussing Walcott and Murray to examine in some detail the local — or national — literary climates which seemed to gather momentum while these poets were in their formative years.

By now it should be clear that my aim is not merely to treat Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison as poets who are poised between a generalised vernacular heritage and an official Anglocentric literary tradition. I also intend to examine them as poets who have had to negotiate the various particular traditions that have been available to them in a post–Empire context. Usually in what follows, when using the term "traditions" I am thinking specifically of *literary* or *poetic* traditions, although in some cases I also deploy the term in connection with oral or folk material, such as Aboriginal, Celtic, and Calypso songs or poems. Furthermore, it should be noted that while both Walcott and Harrison are established playwrights as well as poets, the topic of this thesis is poetry rather than drama, and so I have largely excluded their theatrical works from my discussions.

As noted, while drawing attention to the shared concerns and conditions linking these poets together across regional and national boundaries, I do not wish to subdue an awareness of the individual grain and accents of their respective *oeuvres*. Although they belong roughly to the same generation, it is also important to acknowledge that they grew up in different parts of the English–speaking world. This is also reflected in the overall structure of this study; *Peasant Mandarins: Four Poets Negotiating Traditions after the Empire* assigns one chapter to a detailed discussion of each poet, and so does not dismiss

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57 Mark Williams & Allan Riach, 'Finding the Centre: 'English' Poetry After Empire', *Kunapipi*, XI.1, 1989, pp. 97–8.

the individual approach typically adopted by other critics.[58] A central concern in the four main chapters has been to examine the formative years when Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison initially approached a literary culture during the late period of Empire, and to relate that to the long–term development of their careers as "Peasant Mandarins".

So, in chapter 1, 'Seamus Heaney: From the Earth of Physical Labour to the Heaven of Education', Heaney's formal education is seen to have played a crucial role in the shaping of his literary awareness. Beginning with an assessment of his years in primary and secondary school, the main focus will be on his time at Queen's University in Belfast, where he studied English Language and Literature between 1957–1961. Drawing on recent interviews I have conducted with people who were there at the time — including Heaney himself — and by looking at university material and student poems, I will discuss the general atmosphere at Queen's, and give a profile of the English degree course itself. Central to my argument is that while his university education exposed him to an Anglocentric literary tradition, it also offered Heaney a strengthening of his regional self–awareness, contributing to a sense of belonging within a wider, richly varied English–language heritage. This will be related to Heaney's subsequent career as a poet and scholar, which is why my survey of his time at Queen's University also spans the years he was there as a lecturer in English. Ultimately, it is the purpose of this chapter to show that if his position as a Northern Irish poet negotiating with an English literary tradition has at times been uneasy, his latest works seem to mark a mature return to the configuration of elements that shaped his literary sensibility in the early years.

In 'Derek Walcott: Purifying the Language of the Tribe', Walcott's development as a West Indian poet is first of all examined in the light of the local literary climate of the post–war period. In this connection I have been looking at transcripts from the *Caribbean Voices* programme — a weekly radio broadcast produced by the BBC World Service between 1945–1958 — as well as the Barbadian journal *Bim*, both of which came to play a central role during the 1940s, and which also featured some of Walcott's earliest works. As I will show, the writings produced during this period generally reflect a colonial,

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58 Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Guide* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998); Robert F. Garratt (ed.), *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995); Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992); Stewart Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1991); Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry'*(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Carmel Gaffney (ed.), *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray* (op. cit.); Sandy Byrne, *H, v. & O: The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). See also the works cited on page 1, note 4, as well as on page 9, note 28 above.

anthology–influenced culture which kept seeking the endorsement and stimulus of the old imperial centre. However, considering the derivative nature of Walcott's early apprenticeship poems, I also argue that we should not merely take that as proof of an overpowering colonial hangover which had to be exorcised from his writings. Instead, this chapter takes seriously his own claim that he had to internalise and master a literary tradition which he genuinely felt to be his own, before he could begin to forge the consciousness of his race. This aspect of Walcott's practices as a poet will also be examined in the light of the cultural climate of the 1960s, where a growing number of voices were calling out for a more "authentic" West Indian literature that distanced itself from a Eurocentric 'high' art tradition. Such ideas were generally informed by post–colonial arguments focused on issues of race and class, a debate which implicitly questioned Walcott's identity as a middle–class West Indian with a part–white, part–European inheritance. While primarily concerned with Walcott's negotiations in a West Indian context, this chapter also goes on to consider his role as an English–language poet who addresses a wider audience, wishing to remind us of an elevated, celebratory tradition of writing that reaches back to Homer, but which a late–twentieth–century metropolitan culture seems to have lost its faith in. Walcott, then, will be seen as a "mandarin" as well as a "peasant".

As with Walcott, I have found it necessary in my discussion of Les Murray to devote some space to examining the local climate of post–war literary Australia. 'Les Murray: The Peasant Mandarin' explores his search for a purposefully democratic, anti–élitist voice as a response to a perceived academic, metropolitan take–over of poetry in the twentieth century — a development which is seen to have been furthered by the growing cultural domination coming from the United States during the 1960s. Central to this chapter is Murray's sense of an alternative Boeotian tradition, which has upheld provincial values since the dawn of civilization. While accommodating his native inheritance of rural Australia, this tradition is cosmopolitan in scope, linking a vast range of relegated literatures, and so it has helped Murray to place himself in a wider, international context of poetic culture. Special attention is given to the poet's explorations of Celtic and Aboriginal folk material. Indeed, as will become clear, his idea of the "Peasant Mandarin" has from the outset been inspired by exemplars like Ronald M. Berndt and T. G. H. Strehlow, both leading scholars of Aboriginal culture, as well as Alexander Carmichael, whose *Carmina Gadelica* helped to preserve the fading legacy of Gaelic songs and incantations from the Scottish Highlands. It was during his time at

Sydney University, where he began to form literary affilitations, that Murray first discovered the works of these folk scholars. Spanning his recent collections, *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996) and *Fredy Neptune* (1998), my discussion goes on to look at the poet's self–appointed role as a "Peasant Mandarin" in an Australian as well as an international context.

The fourth chapter, 'Tony Harrison: An Inner Émigré' considers the ways in which Harrison, after his early classical training, began to forge links with various regional and marginalised literatures. Focusing on some of his student verses, written while he was a Leeds University, I investigate his first attempts to draw on his vernacular inheritance through explorative translations of classical verse. At Leeds he was also exposed to new African writing in English, through fellow students like Wole Soyinka, and this interest was further strengthened during his stay in Nigeria between 1962–1966. As I argue, some of the central concerns facing African poets like Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo helped Harrison define and come to terms with his own position as a North of England working–class poet negotiating a received tradition. But apart from reflecting his own provincial vernacular position, Harrison's communing with a wide range of non–English and post–colonial literatures is also seen as a way of addressing the perceived insularity of a national poetic culture. Finally, this chapter considers if Harrison's Englishness has complicated his ways of negotiating an inherited tradition. On a formal level, the discussion centers around his ambition to reconcile colloquial, vernacular speech with a formal, metrically balanced voice.

While focusing on the individual poet, each of these main chapters should be seen as a complementary part of the wider discussion of the role of "Peasant Mandarins". Where appropriate, points of commonality among the four will be noted, serving as preliminaries to the final chapter, in which Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison are discussed collectively and linked to the general climate of contemporary English–language poetry. Where previous criticism has been mostly concerned with seeing each of these poets in a post–colonial regional or national context, this thesis hopes to break some new ground by being alert to the post–Empire development of English–language poetry around the globe. It is in an international context that we must understand the position of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison as brokers who have championed an aesthetic as well as political accommodation between those vernacular aspects of culture which might be designated "peasant", and that line of high culture which, when these writers were growing up, remained the 'great tradition' of the mandarinate.

1

Seamus Heaney: From the Earth of Physical Labour to the Heaven of Education[1]

In two poems from *North* (1975), Seamus Heaney turned to the world of classical mythology, re–enacting the ancient struggle between Hercules and Antaeus. According to legend, Hercules defeated Antaeus who was the son of Gaea — the great earth mother — by lifting him into the air. In Heaney's poem 'Hercules and Antaeus', the "earth–grubber" Antaeus

> is weaned at last:
> a fall was a renewal
> but now he is raised up—
> the challenger's intelligence
>
> is a spur of light,
> a blue prong graiping him
> out of his element
> into a dream of loss and origins...[2]

For an English–language poet writing out a regional experience, this struggle between Hercules and Antaeus can be seen as a befitting emblem of the marginalisation suffered by a local, indigenous culture that has been subjected to the intrusive forces of a self–appointed cultural centre. Commenting on the poem, Neil Corcoran has pointed out that it "seems primarily an allegory of colonization", with Hercules acting as the "stronger aggressor breaking the native Antaeus...by removing him from his source of strength."[3] Such a reading points towards a sense of cultural loss, and stresses the elegiac note in Heaney's poem:

> Balor will die
> and Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull.
>
> Hercules lifts his arms
> in a remorseless V,
> his triumph unassailed
> by the powers he has shaken

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[1] Speaking in an interview on the Danish Radio, Heaney has said: "At the age of eleven...I was to be translated from the earth of physical labour to the heaven of education". Printed in Edward Broadbridge, *DR Skoleradioen: Seamus Heaney*, 81.3/ 89.3 (Copenhagen: Danmarks Radio, 1977), p. 22.

[2] 'Hercules and Antaeus', in Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 129. (Subsequent quotations from Heaney's poetry will be from this work, unless stated otherwise.)

[3] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 57.

> and lifts and banks Antaeus
> high as a profiled ridge,
> a sleeping giant,
> pap for the dispossessed.

However, if the poet laments the conquest of an Antaean, indigenous culture in these lines, he also emulates the Herculean powers by which it has been shaken. In other words, he avoids turning the poem into "pap for the dispossessed": written in English and operating within the context of classical mythology, it moves beyond being an elegiac self–communing, a myopic mumbling in an exclusive, dormant tongue, serving instead as a universalised cultural commentary.

In this way Heaney exhibits a dual sensibility in 'Hercules and Antaeus'. In fact, the poem's struggle seems to summarise a sense of schizophrenia which confronts most English–language writers who have been brought up in a native milieu at odds with an Anglocentric official culture. And particularly to that generation of post–war/ post–Empire poets to which Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Les Murray and Tony Harrison belong, this sense of cultural doubleness seems to have presented itself as a crucial artistic challenge. Focusing on Heaney, this chapter examines the split that has been grafted into his cultural sensibility at an early stage, and how he has sought to accommodate it through his poetry. Central to my discussion is a consideration of the role his education has played in this process. While his first sense of poetry was mediated by the traditional canon of English literature which he encountered at primary school, his regional sensibility was partly validated when he moved to an all–Catholic boarding school for his secondary education. As I will illustrate, the syllabus at St. Columb's College included several texts that accommodated his own cultural background.

The main focus of my discussion, however, will be on Heaney's academic career. First of all, I shall give a detailed account of his time at Queen's University, Belfast, where he studied English Language and Literature between 1957–61. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the English syllabus in the late 1950s/ early 1960s appears to have been narrowly focused on an Anglocentric canon, including very few Irish or twentieth century texts. But while this may be said to have added to an initial cultural timidity towards the study of English, the Language element of Heaney's degree course contributed considerably to a strengthening of his regional self–awareness, while also offering a sense of belonging within a wider, richly varied English–language tradition.

In the course of this survey, I have chosen also to include the years between

1966–1972, when Heaney worked at his old university department as a lecturer, since this period also had a formative impact on the long–term development of his literary awareness. While contributing to a crucial change in the profile of the English department, most notably by strengthening the Irish element in the English syllabus, Heaney also had to familiarise himself with a wider range of literary exemplars. In this way, having to teach twentieth–century British poetry, he gradually came to terms with the works of people like Wilfred Owen, Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Though my discussion will pay attention to the full span of his *oeuvre*, this chapter will concentrate on Heaney's more recent works, *The Redress of Poetry*, his collection of Oxford lectures from 1995, and the two volumes of poetry, *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). These books seem to mark a return to the configuration of elements that shaped his literary sensibility in the early years. As I will show, in his capacity as a "Peasant Mandarin", he has struck a voice that articulates his regional background, while placing itself in the context of the canonical tradition to which he was exposed from the beginning of his career.

Born into a Catholic family in rural Mossbawn, County Derry in 1939, Heaney had his first exposure to English literature when he attended the local county school at Anahorish. The community in which he grew up was mixed, and the relationship between Catholics and Protestants was comparatively tolerant. In poems like 'The Other Side' and 'Trial Runs' Heaney has portrayed what he elsewhere describes as "a kind of backslapping, hearty, uneasy, jovial" atmosphere among the older generations.[4] As the population was too small to support double schools, Anahorish County School catered for both Catholics and Protestants, something that was highly unusual in the sectarian schooling system of Northern Ireland. Typically, Protestant children would be educated in State schools, while Catholics went to Voluntary schools run by the Church.[5] Historically, this sharp segregation of pupils was the result of endless disputes over curricular problems. Apart from the central question of how to provide religious instruction, one of the most controversial issues had been the teaching of history. In their study from 1962, Barritt and Carter noted:

> As a broad generalization, the non–Catholic schools teach English history, as being a well-established discipline with good textbooks, which tell children of their own country (which is the United Kingdom). Irish history is therefore taught as an incidental

[4] Seamus Heaney, 'The Other Side' and 'Trial Runs', *Opened Ground*, pp. 59 & 87. The quotation is from Seamus Heaney's interview with James Randall, *Ploughshares*, 5.3, 1979, p. 9. (Hereafter cited as *Ploughshares*.)

[5] For a useful summary of the complex historical background of sectarian education in Northern Ireland, see 'Education And the Sectarian Problem', chapter 5 in D. P. Barritt & C. F. Carter, *The Northern Ireland Problem: A Study in Group Relations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

> to English history. Catholic schools are more likely to teach Irish history in its own right, and to treat it as the story of heroism in maintaining national feeling under foreign rule... The great obstacle to the teaching of Irish history has been the lack of adequate textbooks, particularly at the junior level (ibid., pp. 91–2).

In both cases, it seems that what the schools did was to transmit a provincial consciousness: Protestant pupils were taught to look across the Irish Sea for their cultural centre, while Catholics had to look south of the border to the Republic for theirs.

While officially a non–denominational school, Heaney stresses that the great majority of the children attending Anahorish were Catholics.[6] And as he recalls in *Among Schoolchildren*, the teaching was generally "at variance with the common hearth feelings of the pupils",[7] implying that the cultural bias of the official syllabus was Anglocentric. In this way, Irish history was not formally part of the curriculum, but "somehow incorporated in the classes" (Personal Interview). This also corroborates Barritt and Carter's point about inadequate textbooks: in 'Mossbawn' Heaney notes that the teaching of Irish history was "in reality a reading of myths and legends".[8] Looking back in this essay on his early encounter with poetry at Anahorish, he furthermore points out that "[t]he literary language, the civilized utterance from the classic canon of English poetry, was a kind of force–feeding. It did not delight us by reflecting our experience; it did not re–echo our own speech in formal and surprising arrangements" (p. 26). Thus, Heaney remembers "the reading book where we learned off 'Oh to be in England'", and the singing lesson "where we belted out 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'" (*Among Schoolchildren*, p. 7). These recollections correspond with the accounts of several other post–Empire writers, as will also become clear in the following chapters. However, it should also be noted that the inherent cultural criticism in such accounts generally reflects a retrospective response, revealing the influence of a growing post–colonial debate. Being interviewed for a 1987 research report called *Education and the Arts*, Heaney stressed that "as kids you didn't...perceive any tensions there, you just took that whole world in", and then went on to revise his earlier descriptions of the schooling system in Nortern Ireland:

> When I was at school in the 'forties and 'fifties what I remember most was all the talk about the necessity for Catholic education and the philosophical and religious coherence that was involved... In primary school we learnt our prayers in Irish... There was

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6 Personal interview with Seamus Heaney, conducted in Edinburgh on 26 March 1996. (Hereafter cited as 'Personal interview'.)

7 Seamus Heaney, *Among Schoolchildren* (Belfast: Dept. of Further Professional Studies in Education, Queen's University, 1984), p. 7.

8 Seamus Heaney, 'Mossbawn', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 23.

> definitely, at both primary and secondary level, a cultural philosophical coherence about the things which was on the whole Catholic Gaelic nationalist.[9]

In a letter to the present author, Heaney also notes in connection with his early exposure to Browning's 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' ('Oh to be in England'): "I'm sure I encountered it, but did not actually learn it all by heart early on. It's the kind of poem other boys (who had attended different primary schools) in the class at St. Columb's would recite when called upon."[10]

Finishing primary school in the summer of 1951, Heaney belonged to the first generation of Catholic students who benefitted from the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act: as an 'eleven–plus' student he won a scholarship to St. Columb's College, Derry. A diocesan boarding school, St. Columb's was like so many other Voluntary Catholic schools run by priests, and geared to preparing its male students for the priesthood. Existing accounts of the place stress its strict discipline and orthodoxy of faith, painting a picture rather similar to that of Clongowes in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[11] The cultural climate of the school clearly also played a crucial role in the shaping of Heaney's political awareness and sense of his own Irish–Catholic identity. During his time at St. Columb's, he studied Irish, became an active member of the Gaelic Society, and was introduced to Daniel Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* (*Parker*, pp. 14 & 39).

It was also at this stage that Heaney began to open his eyes to literature. As Parker has illustrated, studying English under Sean O'Kelly he read the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, Hardy and Hopkins (*Parker*, p. 17). All of these writers were represented in a schoolbook anthology called *A Pageant of English Verse*. In 'Learning from Eliot' Heaney notes: "About one quarter of the poems in this book were set each year as part of the official syllabus for the Northern Ireland Senior Certificate of Education".[12] Elsewhere, in his essay 'Burns's Art Speech', he mentions another schoolbook, *The Ambleside Book of Verse*, which was also widely used in the schools of Northern Ireland at the time.[13] Both anthologies had been published in 1949, compiled by E. W. Parker for

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9 Daniel Murphy et al., *Education and the Arts* (Dublin: Dept. of Higher Education & Educational Research, Trinity College, University of Dublin, 1987), pp. 64–5.

10 Seamus Heaney, letter to Nils Eskestad, 18 September 1998.

11 See for instance Heaney's poem 'The Ministry of Fear', *Opened Ground*, pp. 134–6. See also the account made by Seamus Deane (who was Heaney's contemporary at St. Columb's) in his 'Maths Class' chapter from *Reading in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996); and chapter 1 in Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1993). (Hereafter cited as *Parker*.)

12 Seamus Heaney,'Learning from Eliot', *Agenda*, 27.1, 1989, pp. 18–19.

13 Seamus Heaney, 'Burns's Art Speech', in *Robert Burns & Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 217–8.

the Longmans *Literary Heritage* series, and the selections are predominantly pre–twentieth century.[14] *The Ambleside Book of Verse* reads as a general introduction to various poetic genres, ranging from 'Ballads', 'Narrative Poems' and 'Pictures from Longer Poems' to 'Lyrics', and with a strong emphasis on eighteenth– and nineteenth–century texts. *A Pageant of English Verse* takes a more historical, chronological approach, beginning with the thirteenth century and spanning a few early twentieth–century poets. In his foreword to *A Pageant of English Verse*, Parker noted that "far from suppressing great poetry because its fame is widespread, I have represented our greatest poets strongly, and it is their most important poems which form the nucleus around which the rest of the selection has been constructed" (p. v). In this way, both books are true to a canonical English tradition, while incorporating a small selection of Irish writers.[15]

One of the poets whom Heaney discovered while studying English at St. Columb's (and whom Parker omits to mention) was T. S. Eliot. In Heaney's year, the syllabus included 'The Hollow Men' and 'The Journey of the Magi', the only two Eliot poems included in *A Pageant of English Verse*. And although Heaney confesses that "It was in the middle of my own life before I began to grow up to T. S. Eliot" ('Learning from Eliot', p. 17), he also recalls the strong, but "truly odd" impact that 'The Hollow Men' had on him. Even though he was "daunted by the otherness of Eliot and all that he stood for", he requested his *Collected Poems* when one of his aunts offered to buy him a couple of books in 1955:

> It arrived in a food–parcel from home, and it had an air of contraband about it, because the only reading matter we were permitted, I am shocked to recollect, was what the sparsely stocked college library held, or what our course syllabi required. So there I was in 1955 with my forbidden book in my hand, with a literary reach that exceeded my grasp, alone with the words on the page (p. 18).

What is remarkable when looking at the selections in *The Ambleside Book of Verse*

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[14] E.W. Parker (ed.), *The Ambleside Book of Verse* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949); and *A Pageant of English Verse* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949).

[15] The *Ambleside* book includes two poems by Yeats ('The Ballad of Father Gilligan' and 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'), Padraic Colum's 'An Old Woman of the Roads', Moira O'Neill's 'Corrymeela', and Seumas O'Sullivan's 'In Mercer Street'; *A Pageant of English Verse* has six poems by Yeats ('The Stolen Child', 'Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', 'The Wild Swans at Coole', 'When You are Old', 'The Host of the Air' and 'The Song of the Wandering Aengus'), as well as Louis MacNeice's 'Snow'.

and *A Pageant of English Verse* is the relatively large number of Scottish texts included.[16] And in the regional context of Northern Ireland, this would have a special significance to the teaching of English. In 'Burns's Art Speech', Heaney remembers how reading Burns's poem 'To a Mouse' helped him "collapse the distance I expected to feel between myself and the schoolbook poetry I encountered first at Anahorish Elementary school and subsequently at St. Columb's" (p. 217):

> In those days...we expected that the language in the written page would take us out of our unofficial speaking selves and transport us to a land of formal words...'Hail to thee, blithe spirit' fulfilled these expectations perfectly, as did the elevation of 'Tyger, tyger, burning bright'. But next comes this:
>
> Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous *beastie*.
>
> and this was different. In a single monosyllable, even before a metre or a melody could get suggested, a totally reliable aural foundation had been laid in place. The word 'wee' put its stressed foot down and in one pre-emptive vocative strike took over the emotional and cultural ground, dispossessing the rights of written standard English and offering asylum to all vernacular comers (p. 218).

According to Heaney, he had known this piece since his childhood, but what was revelational to him at this stage was to see it anthologised "without condescension in a high cultural context" (p. 219). In 'Burns's Art Speech', Heaney furthermore makes a link between Burns and the Irish-language poetry of Seamus Dall MacCuarta, Art MacCumhaigh, and most importantly Cathal Buí MacGiolla Ghunna, whom he also began to study in secondary school:

> MacGiolla Ghunna was a significant presence to me in my mid-teens when I was beginning to be able to read and feel my way into poetry in the Irish language. Significant because he was a northern voice and part of a group of Ulster poets whose work, like Burns's, was sustained out of the past by a long and learned literary tradition; but this once privileged tradition subsisted in the poet's time as part of a culture that was oral, rural and more and more dislodged from its previous high cultural authority... Their words and intonations belonged to an Ulster Irish in which I felt completely at home, since it was that particular strain of the language which had taught to me in Derry (p. 222).

Studying Irish at St. Columb's, it was presumably also around this time that Heaney familiarised himself with Dineen's Irish Dictionary. In *Among Schoolchildren*, he notes

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16 The *Ambleside* book lists the anonymous 'The Bonny Earl of Moray', 'The Wee Cooper o' Fife', 'Bonnie George Campbell', Alan Cunningham's 'Hame, Hame, Hame', James Hogg's 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', William Glen's 'Wae's Me for Prince Charlie', three poems by Walter Scott ('Bonnie Dundee', 'Pibroch of Dunuil Dhu', and 'Coronach'), two by Robert Burns ('To a Mountain Daisy' and 'A Man's a Man for a' That'), and Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Vagabond' and 'Romance'. *A Pageant* includes 'The Twa Corbies' (anonymous), William Dunbar's 'In Honour of the City of London' and 'To a Lady', five poems by Burns ('Mary Morrison', 'My Bonnie Mary', 'John Anderson my Jo', 'My Luve's like a Red, Red Rose', 'O wert Thou in the Cauld Blast' and 'To a Field Mouse'), three by Scott ('Proud Maisie', 'Lucy Ashton's Song' and 'Answer'), two by Stevenson ('In the Highlands' and 'Requiem'), and Edwin Muir's 'The Road'.

how that book helped him to ratify his "sense of a relationship to a hidden Ulster" (p. 9). Particularly one experience had an almost epiphanic effect on Heaney:

> I came across...a word with the letters *Doir* in brackets after it, a word which was thereby defined as one peculiar to the Irish spoken at one time in my own English–speaking County Derry. The word was "Lachtar", meaning a flock of young chickens. Suddenly I was animated by the fact of loss which Corkery had described. The word had survived in our district as a common and, as far as I had known until then, an English word but now I realized it lived upon our tongues like a capillary stretching back to a time when Irish was the lingua franca of the whole place (pp. 8–9).

Heaney describes this experience in the context of the cultural self–consciousness which Stephen Dedalus gains towards the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, thereby overcoming his linguistic inferiority complex towards the English: "Suddenly the resentful nationalism of my Catholic minority experience was fused with a concept of identity that was enlarging and releasing and would eventually help me to relate my literary education with the heritage of the home ground" (ibid.).

In 'The Ministry of Fear', a poem dedicated to Seamus Deane and concerning their time together at St. Columb's, Heaney speaks of their early poetic aspirations:

> Those poems in longhand, ripped from the wire spine
> Of your exercise book, bewildered me—
> Vowels and ideas bandied free
> As the seed–pods blowing off our sycamores.
> I tried to write about the sycamores
> And innovated a South Derry rhyme
> With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*.
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 135.)

The outcome of these endeavours was a poem called 'Reaping in Heat', which later appeared in 1959 in *Q*, a Queen's University student publication:

> Hushed
> And lulled
> Lay the field, under a high–sky sun.
> Pushed
> And pulled
> Came the rasp of steel on stone,
> For, slashing the drowsiness,
> The mower was whetting his scythe....
> And the sycamores heaved a sleepless sigh.
> Close hills
> Shimmered
> Liquidly, fascinating the mower,
> Lark's trills
> Shimmered
> Down the thin burnt air. Lower
> And deeper and cooler sinks now
> The sycamore shade, and naked sheaves

Are whitening on the empty stubble.[17]

Several echoes make themselves heard in this piece, which draws heavily on the English canon of pastoral poetry. In his essay 'Feeling into Words', Heaney claims that already as a schoolboy his poetic ear had been conditioned by learning passages by heart, and quotes Keats's "and his vessel now/ Grated the quaystone with her brazen prow", and Wordsworth's "All shod with steel,/ We hiss'd along the polished ice" as particularly memorable passages that have stayed with him (*Preoccupations*, p. 46). The sound–imagery in both examples is also felt in Heaney's "rasp of steel on stone". Also Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper', which appeared in *The Ambleside Book of Verse*, and where "the Vale profound/ Is overflowing with the sound" of a "Highland Lass.../ Reaping and singing by herself",[18] seems to inform the poem. But interestingly, the main influence detectable in 'Reaping in Heat' is Milton's 'L'Allegro', which was included in *A Pageant of English Verse*. In 'L'Allegro', the poet muses: "Straight mine eye hath caught new pleasures,/ Whilst the landscape round it measures", talking about "the lark" that begins "his flight".[19] Even Heaney's "South Derry rhyme" of "*hushed* and *lulled*" with "*pushed* and *pulled*" may have been inspired by such lines as "By whispering winds soon lulled asleep", and "She was pinched and pulled". More obvious is the concurrence of Heaney's line "The mower was whetting his scythe" with Milton's "And the mower whets his scythe". In hindsight, it is rather significant that Heaney should try, already at this stage, to articulate his own South Derry voice while drawing on the highly English–tempered poetry of Milton.

In 1957, after completing his secondary education, Heaney won a Northern Ireland state bursary to read English Language and Literature at Queen's University, Belfast. Once again, this was a direct result of the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act, and so Heaney was part of the first major intake of Catholic students at the university. Upon his arrival in September that year, the English Department was headed by Professor F. W. Baxter, an Oxonian who had taught at Queen's since 1930. According to Geoffrey Carnall, one of the school's lecturers between 1952–1960, Baxter had "tried to preserve as much as he could of the Oxford syllabus, which ends around 1830, with a strong

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17 Seamus Heaney, 'Reaping in Heat', *Q*, No. 17, Michaelmas Term 1959, N. pag.

18 William Wordsworth, 'The Solitary Reaper', *Selected Poetry*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 242–3.

19 John Milton, 'L'Allegro', *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross, Rev. ed. (London & New York: Anchor Books/ Doubleday, 1971), pp. 106–110.

emphasis on Old and Middle English".[20] In 1958, however, Peter Butter arrived to replace Baxter, at which point Carnall recalls there was an effort to make the syllabus "much more like what most universities had around that time". Judging from the university calendars, this basically meant extending the range to include more literature from the twentieth century, and turning the emphasis from Old and Middle English to Renaissance and post–Renaissance periods.

Still, despite these changes the choice of prescribed texts remained true to the traditional English university syllabus. Although Irish writers like Shaw and Burke were being taught, they were "subsumed", according to Carnall, "and treated as part of the English canon". Accordingly, the only reference Heaney remembers being made to Irish writing while he was a student was in a short account of Yeats's early poetry (Personal Interview). In his first year he studied Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Milton's *Minor Poems*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Dickens's *Hard Times*, Housman's *Collected Poems*, and Shaw's *Three Plays for Puritans*. For his second year, he read Chaucer, Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Metaphysical Poets* (a Penguin anthology edited by Helen Gardner), books iii–iv of *Paradise Lost*, Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* and *Headlong Hall*, and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.[21] Third and fourth year courses typically focused on particular periods (Heaney recalls taking "Some writers and writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" as well as "Modern English and American literature"), and here the lecturers were given more of a carte blanche as to which texts they wished to include. In this way, teaching nineteenth–century literature, Carnall would incorporate John Henry Newman "as a very enlightened Catholic, for the sake of the Catholic students — and also to make the Protestant students realise that some Catholic authors were really rather good".

During Heaney's time at Queen's, the English Department had no Irish or Northern Irish lecturers among their staff, and all had an educational background from Oxbridge or Scotland. And this seemed very much to determine the profile of the place. Peter Butter notes: "I don't know what Seamus thought about us, but I dare say we might have appeared to him to be very much non–Irish."[22] Similarly, Derek Todd, who came to the English Department as an Assistant Lecturer in 1960, also felt that "the set–up at Queen's

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[20] Personal interview with Geoffrey Carnall, conducted in Edinburgh on 21 February 1996. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

[21] Details of the courses Heaney took are from the Queen's *University Calendars* 1957/ 1958 – 1960/ 1961 (Belfast: Queen's University), and from the author's personal interview with Heaney.

[22] Personal interview with Peter Butter, conducted in Glasgow on 12 December 1995. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

did not markedly differ from the system I had been used to at University College, London."[23] And arriving at Queen's in 1964, Michael Allen's first impression of the place was that it was still very "Edwardian, like a colonial outpost", with the English Department "one of the last bastions of compulsory Old English."[24] On several occasions, Heaney has also pointed to this colonial atmosphere. In *Among Schoolchildren*, for instance, he speaks of the initial difficulties of finding his feet as a student, studying Shakespeare and Dickens, "learning to find my way among the ironies and niceties of Jane Austen's vicarages, and learning the rituals of the sherry party by attending receptions at the house of our Oxford professor" (p. 7). Obviously, such experiences induced a sense of cultural unease: "Was I two persons or one?" Heaney asks, "Was I extending myself or breaking myself apart?...Was I failing to live up to the aspiring literary intellectual effort when I was at home, was I betraying the culture of the parish when I was at the university?" (pp. 7–8). In 'Further Language', an unpublished paper given at an ACIS conference at Queen's in 1995, Heaney also noted that "the habit of suspicion and the awareness of difference were...deeply ingrained" in the Catholic students: "We deconstructed *avant la lettre*. Semiotics were second nature to us. We could read ex–British Army loyalism from a certain fastidiousness and severity in the trim of a porter's moustache."[25]

Generally, however, it seems that for most of the students arriving in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the university experience became a liberating move away from the old pieties and antagonisms of Northern Ireland. Queen's University succeeded on the whole in catering for a mixed student population. Of course there was a tendency among the students to stick together socially in denominational groups. George Watson, who arrived in 1960 as an English student, admits that "when I think about the life at Queen's, the friends that I spent four years with, quite a few number of the close ones would have been Catholics".[26] Nevertheless, the general feeling was that "the old antagonisms were dying out". Carnall also illustrates this with an incident that took place in 1958 or 1959:

> One Saturday I was having lunch in the Students' Union, and I think people were

[23] Derek Todd, letter to Nils Eskestad, 12 December 1995.

[24] Personal interview with Michael Allen, conducted in Belfast on 6 February 1996. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

[25] Seamus Heaney, 'Further Language', a keynote address given at Queen's University at an ACIS conference on the theme "Ireland: Island of Diversity", Summer 1995, private ms, p. 9. (Hereafter cited as 'Further Language'.)

[26] Personal interview with George Watson, conducted in Aberdeen on 16 February 1996. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

> sitting in their respective denominational groupings. For some reason, one table began singing 'The Sash My Father Wore'. Now, one might have expected the Catholics to respond by singing 'A Nation Once Again', but they didn't. The whole place seemed to surge up singing 'I Ain't Gonna Study War No More' — everybody joined in!

Particularly to the new and growing population of Catholic students, this period must have presented itself as a time of new opportunities. And according to George Watson, there was a growing sense of confidence, which also manifested itself in the public life at the university. During his freshers week, for example, he was surprised to find that the students' clubs and societies were primarily staffed and presided over by Catholics:

> It was connected entirely to that feeling of "now's our chance, at last we're out, here we go". It wasn't triumphant in any way, but it produced a general sense of great confidence among the Catholic students. There was a tremendous sense of energised activity among us all. And most of the Protestant students quite welcomed it.

It is also in the light of these cultural developments that we must understand the Catholic students' inclination to allow themselves to indulge in a traditionally English literary canon. As old prejudices seemed to fade, they were given a license to move into new areas and still feel confident about their cultural heritage. Peter Butter recalls that some of the Catholic students would dedicate their essays 'Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam': "They were taking a stance, you know... But they all seemed to get on together perfectly well." Similarly, George Watson notes when asked about studying English Literature:

> You'd feel slightly guilty about enjoying it, but you *enjoyed* it. The general response was: "to hell with political correctness, this is good stuff!", and you had a license to read it because you were studying English Literature, and you had a license to write about it enthusiastically.

Given these new opportunities, the Catholic students generally also distinguished themselves academically. According to Peter Butter, Heaney's year was a particularly good one, the two "stars" being Heaney and Seamus Deane, both Catholics. And this tendency seemed to continue throughout the 1960s. Philip Hobsbaum, who was appointed as a lecturer in 1962, remembers that he "got told off by a bunch of extreme Protestants one year": "They said, "You're turning Queen's into a hot–bed of Romanism. There were three Firsts in English this year, and every one went to a Pape." Well, they were right!"[27]

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27 Personal interview with Philip Hobsbaum, conducted in Glasgow on 12 December 1995. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

One of the English Department's most distinguished teachers was Laurence Lerner, a South African who also wrote poetry and fiction. Lerner mainly taught twentieth–century poetry, and in this capacity Heaney has referred to him on several occasions as "a lively promoter".[28] Among the other lecturers in literature whom he recalls being influenced by was Matthew P. McDiarmid. McDiarmid's main interests were medieval and eighteenth–century Scottish literature, and he is best known for his work on Fergusson and his edition of *The Wallace* by Blind Hary. According to Philip Hobsbaum, though, he was "a man who...was interested in everything, his mind went everywhere". Heaney also remembers him primarily as a brilliant teacher of Shakespeare (Personal Interview).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the atmosphere of energised activity manifested itself in the number of student publications that emerged at Queen's. In February 1959, the university's English Society launched a magazine called *Gorgon*, containing articles, poems and reviews written mostly by students at the English Department. Its first issue included an article called 'A Demotic Argot', accompanied by an extract from an interview with E. M. Foster, which dealt with J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and the use of demotic speech in literature.[29] Similar interests were voiced in the following issue of *Gorgon*, where Laurence Lerner's novel *The Englishmen* was being reviewed and praised for "the unpolished direct language of the dialogue".[30] Such literary preferences seem to have been widespread among the students during this period. In the autumn of 1959, Dennis Donoghue was invited by the English Society to give a talk on "Poetry and the Behavior of Speech".[31] Also, in the academic year of 1959/ 1960, an optional course on "Modern English and American Literature" was introduced, a course Heaney took, studying Robert Frost, Hemingway and E. E. Cummings (Personal interview).

Despite this growing interest in a modern literature that deploys unstilted demotic speech, most of the student verses that appeared in *Gorgon* and other university publications were generally written in an elevated, florid style imitative of pre–twentieth–century English poetry. A typical example are lines like: "Beauty eluded by grasping arms:/ in life she passed me by:/ so I thought to capture her gossamer spirit/ in a

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28 Seamus Heaney quoted in the Queen's University Newsletter, *Update*, No. 215, 5 October 1995 — a special edition celebrating the anouncement that Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize. See also the foreword to *Preoccupations*, in which Heaney extends his gratitude to Lerner, who "quickened my love of poetry" (p. 14).

29 George Carroll, 'A Demotic Argot', *Gorgon*, No. 1, February 1959.

30 D. I. N., 'The Living Language', *Gorgon*, No 2, May 1959, p. 21.

31 'Notices from the English Society', *Gorgon*, No. 3, November 1959.

shimmering web of poetry."[32] Towards the end of his time as a student, Heaney had become actively involved in the production of *Gorgon*. And in the Hillary Term of 1961, he wrote a long editorial called 'The Seductive Muse', in which he addressed the general quality of student writing:

> The undergraduate's first poems are usually imitative, sensuous, expansive and lacking in structure. Cuts of Keats, slivers of Shelley, trickles of Tennyson and hunks of Hopkins all seethe in the First Arts creative cauldron. This is not to be deplored; it is good practice in the use of words...the amateur's first furtive verses usually imitates or parodies an actual poem that he has studied and enjoyed, recapturing the original turns of phrase and runs of rhythm.[33]

As it turns out these lines read as a self–commentary, written in his final year when Heaney had had about half a dozen pieces printed in various university publications. His first two poems, 'Reaping in Heat' and 'October Thought' had appeared in *Q* in October 1959, and the following month *Gorgon* carried a third piece, entitled 'Nostalgia in the Afternoon.' I have already touched upon the influence of Milton in 'Reaping in Heat', and these three pieces all share a rural, pastoral setting:

> Starling thatch–watches, and sudden swallow
> Straight shoots to its mud–nest, home–nest rafter,
> Up through dry, dust–drunk cobwebs, like laughter
> Flitting the roof of black–oak, bog–sod and rods of willow;
> And twittering flirtings in the eaves as sparrows quarrel.[34]

Discussing 'October Thought' and 'Nostalgia in the Afternoon', Michael Parker rightly points to the stylistic influence of Hopkins that has "overwhelmed any personal impulse to communicate" (*Parker*, p. 24). Generally, Heaney's student verses reflect an interest in poetry with a strong verbal texture. As he admits in 'Feeling into Words': "Words alone were certain good... I kept the whole thing at an arm's length, read poetry for the noise" (*Preoccupations*, p. 46). Thus, appearing in the same issue of *Gorgon* as 'The Seductive Muse', a piece called 'Song of My Man–Alive' also reveals the heavy influence of Dylan Thomas. There is clearly a strong echo of 'Fern Hill', for instance, in lines like "it was all tune–tumbling/ Hill–happy and wine–wonderful", "It was life leaping wild in the womb/ of my young spring".[35] In his autobiographical essay 'Belfast', Heaney recalls that "I don't think many of us had a sense of contemporary poetry —

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32 'The Golden Apples of the Sun', *Gorgon*, No. 3, November 1959, p. 16.

33 Seamus Heaney, 'The Seductive Muse', *Gorgon*, Hillary Term 1961, p. 5.

34 Seamus Heaney, 'October Thought' (signed "Incertus"), *Q*, No. 17, Michaelmas Term 1959.

35 Seamus Heaney, 'Song of My Man–Alive' (signed "Incertus"), *Gorgon*, Hillary Term 1961, p. 19.

Dylan Thomas's records were as near as we seemed to get to the living thing" (*Preoccupations*, p. 28). And later, in 'Dylan the Durable?' from *The Redress of Poetry*, he notes: "Dylan Thomas will always remain part of the initiation of that first 'eleven–plus' generation into literary culture".[36] As will become apparent in the following chapters, Tony Harrison — an 'eleven–plus' student like Heaney — and Derek Walcott were equally influenced by Thomas in their early years. Heaney's essay 'Dylan the Durable?' is an interesting reassessment of his own first response to Thomas's poetry:

> When I thought of Dylan Thomas as the subject of this lecture, I intended to stress the positive metrical power of [his] early poems, and had hoped to find in them an echo still travelling outward from Christopher Marlowe's mighty line. In my recollection, Thomas's poems retained a turning, humming resonance, something that seemed to be generated less by the movement of the iambic pentametre than by the circulation of the blood itself (pp. 133–4).

However, Heaney has come to feel that "the reader's older self is punishing the younger one who harkened to Thomas's oceanic music and credited its promise to bring the world and the self into cosmic harmony" (pp. 136–7).

That Heaney's early sense of poetry was primarily driven by an aural appreciation also becomes clear in 'Learning from Eliot', where he speaks of his problematic relationship to Eliot's poetry as a student. A major presence for anyone studying literature in the late 1950s, Eliot's name, he recalls, "was a buzz word for obscurity, and the word "obscurity" was in turn suggestive of "modern poetry"" (p. 18). From the start Heaney was drawn to what he describes as "the antique flute of sensuous writing" (p. 29), and the sense that Eliot's poetry "stood like geometry in an absence" bewildered him (p. 22). As noted earlier, he had already sniffed at his poetry in St. Columb's, but at Queen's he was required to read John Hayward's 1953 Penguin edition of Eliot's *Selected Prose*. In Heaney's own words, it was like getting Eliot "in capsule form, to carry on to the battlefield" (Personal interview), and it helped him shape his own understanding of the poetic medium. Among the essays he "read and re–read" was 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' ('Learning from Eliot', p. 25), and Heaney also remembers responding to Eliot's notion of the auditory imagination:

> his example of a poet's intelligence exercising itself in the activity of listening, all of this seemed to excuse my own temperamental incapacity to paraphrase and my disinclination to engage a poem's argument and conceptual progress...I was encouraged

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[36] Seamus Heaney, 'Dylan the Durable?', *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995, pp. 124–5.

to seek for the contour of a meaning within the pattern of a rhythm.[37]

In 'Feeling into Words', Heaney sees a connection between his early fascination for Hopkins's "bumpy alliterating music" and "the peculiar regional characteristics of a Northern Ireland accent": "Our tongue strikes the tangent of the consonant rather than it rolls the circle of the vowel...and it may be because of this affinity between my dialect and Hopkins's oddity that [my] first verses turned out as they did" (*Preoccupations*, pp. 44–5). Arguably, this would also account for his general preference for a poetry with rigorous aural energies. In *Gorgon* from December 1960, Heaney wrote these 'Lines to Myself':

> In poetry I wish you would
> Avoid the lilting platitude.
> Give us poems humped and strong,
> Laced tight with thongs of song,
> Poems that explode in silence
> Without forcing,without violence.[38]

As he reveals in 'Feeling into Words', behind these lines was "'Ars Poetica', MacLeish's and Verlaine's, Eliot's 'objective correlative' (half understood) and several critical essays (by myself and others) about 'concrete realization'" (p. 46). Paradoxically, though, with their iambic regularity these lines fail to realise their own voiced intentions. But in other instances, the sprung music of Heaney's student verses, attributed by Parker to the example of Hopkins, is created through a heavy use of trochaic inversions reminiscent of the Chaucerian line. Often, Heaney plays with Old English kennings, as in "blue–scooped", "soap–slip", "cloud–cream" ('Nostalgia in the Afternoon'), and "mud–nest", "home–rest", "dust–drunk", "black–oak", "bog–sod", "ripe–round" and "plum–blue" ('October Thought'). Significantly, this is also a device he has returned to later in his poetry. For example, as Bernard O'Donoghue has pointed out,[39] Heaney marries the use of kennings with Yeats's trochaic inversions of 'Lapis Lazuli' in his 'Glanmore Sonnets, VII' (*Opened Ground*, p. 169), as well as in the title poem from

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37 'Learning from Eliot', p. 26. Eliot's passage about the auditory imagination, included in Hayward's Penguin selection, is from his essay 'Matthew Arnold', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933). And the passage, which is also quoted in 'Learning from Eliot', has been rather talismanic for Heaney: it seems to inform his discussion of what he calls "poetic technique" in 'Feeling into Words' (*Preoccupations*, p. 47), and it is quoted again in 'The Murmur of Malvern', *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 25, and in 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', ibid., p. 148, as well as in 'Burns's Art Speech' (p. 232).

38 Seamus Heaney, 'Lines to Myself',*Gorgon*, December 1960, reprinted in 'Feeling into Words', p. 46.

39 Bernard O' Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 82 and 133. (Hereafter cited as *O'Donoghue*.)

Seeing Things: "Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel".[40]

If such play with kennings and consonantal energies reflect an ear that has been conditioned by a Northern Ireland dialect, it is also worth noting that Heaney's poem 'Song for My Man–Alive' ends with a "shrill skirl" which the poet wishes "would swell, swelter and crash/ Into a lifetime symphony,/ Resonant through days to come". Without over–stressing the significance of that word, "skirl" — a Scots word referring to the sound of bagpipes — does echo a cultural diction at variance with a standardised literary English. Such instances seem to suggest a budding awareness of dialect, and this can in fact also be linked to Heaney's schooling at Queen's. Because while the literature being offered for study did little to accommodate the students' sense of their Northern Irish background, the Language element of the English course provided an important link with the regional culture of Ulster. This was particularly owing to the efforts of John Braidwood, the department's lecturer in Language since 1949. A Scotsman, Braidwood had originally studied in Glasgow under Professor Ritchie Girvan, and during the 1960s he was working on an Ulster–Scots dictionary in collaboration with the Ulster Folk Museum. This project later formed the basis of his inaugural lecture, 'The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', when he was appointed as a professor in 1969. The lecture deals with dialect as "the mark of our history upon our tongues", and Braidwood begins by asserting: "To betray one's local origin is nothing; to be ashamed is."[41]

This awareness of the cultural importance of dialects was also something Braidwood had been eager to pass on to his students. In his first year, Heaney took a course called "The growth and structure of the language", followed in the second year by "Early English" (Personal interview). Commenting on Braidwood's teaching in 'Further Language', Heaney calls it the "one very enriching introduction to the Irish dimension at that time". Describing Braidwood as "a Scotsman with a thorough Scots accent", he points out: "he...not only came equipped with a perfect ear for the Ulster accents that he laboured among, but he also possessed an equally instinctive sense of the cultural, political and religious nuances that were often latent within those accents and idioms" ('Further Language', p. 8). This also comes across in Braidwood's 1969 inaugural talk, which Heaney attended as a lecturer of the English Department. "Dialect should be studied in the full context of folklife", Braidwood notes, before considering a number of superstitions which distinguish the vernacular culture of Ulster — such as "turning back if

[40] Seamus Heaney, 'Seeing Things', *Seeing Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 16.

[41] John Braidwood, 'The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', Inaugural Lecture delivered at Queen's on 23 April 1969 (Belfast: Queen's University, 1975), p. 4.

a rat or a red–haired woman crossed your path" ('Ulster Dialect Lexicon', p. 21). It is not unlikely that Braidwood would have mentioned such examples of folklore in the classes Heaney took as a student. In any case, it is interesting to note that Heaney used the same saying as the basis for 'An Advancement of Learning', a poem written in the early 1960s:

> ...a rat
> Slimed out of the water and
> My throat sickened so quickly that
>
> I turned down the path in cold sweat.[42]

In 'The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', Braidwood also devotes some time to discussing the non–standard names for various birds and plants found in Ulster dialects: "Some of the most imaginative bird names are translation loans from Irish — *Little Goat of the Evening* [gabhairín oidhche] or *Air Goat* [mionnán aeir] for the snipe, from its plaintive call (in Munster it is called *goureen–roe* [gabhairín roe, little goat of the frost])" (pp. 24–5). And in 'The Backward Look' from his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*, Heaney lists all of these imaginative, non–standard names provided by Braidwood's lecture:

> A snipe's bleat is fleeing
> its nesting ground
> into dialects,
> into variants,
>
> transliterations whirr
> on the nature reserves—
> *little goat of the air,*
> *of the evening,*
>
> *little goat of the frost.*
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 56.)

And he continues:

> It is his tail–feathers
> drumming elegies
> in the slipstream
>
> of wild goose
> and yellow bittern,

clearly referring to the yellow bittern in MacGiolla Ghunna's 'An Bunnan Bui', a poem

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42 Seamus Heaney, 'An Advancement of Learning', *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 18.

Heaney read at St. Columb's and has later translated into English.[43] Another example given by Braidwood in his lecture, and later used by Heaney, is the elder–tree, which in Ulster–Scots has become "bourtree" ('The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', p. 27). In his Glanmore Sonnets from *Field Work* , Heaney writes of the "boortree": "elderberry I have learned to call it.// Elderberry? It is shires of dreaming wine./ Boortree is bower tree, where I played 'touching tongues'/ And felt another's texture quick on mine" (*Opened Ground*, p. 167).

In 'The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', Braidwood furthermore points out that the vernacular, non–standard names for flora and fauna in Ulster are often closely linked with bits of folklore, and most typically Irish folklore: there are cases, he notes, where "The legend identifies the plant" (p. 27). Such observations clearly chime with the cultural etymology that informed Heaney's writings throughout the 1970s, most notably his *dinnseanchas* from *Wintering Out*, where place names such as 'Anahorish' and 'Broagh' are treated as potent signifiers of the cultural and linguistic history of the Ulster territory. What Heaney sought to do in these poems was not merely to establish a link with the Irish dimension, but just as much to bring the three linguistic strains of Ulster — Irish, Scots and Elizabethan English — into some kind of alignment:

> I very much wanted to affirm the rights of the Irish language as part of that Ulster mix, in order to correct the official, east–of–bann emphasis on the province's ur–languages as Ulster Scots and Elizabethan English, but I also wanted to align the northern element in the mix against the "southron" ('Burns's Art Speech', p. 221).

Similarly, tracing the genesis of Ulster speech in 'The Ulster Dialect Lexicon', Braidwood begins by saying: "As every schoolboy knows — or ought to know — the history of the Ulster dialects begins like a bad joke — "There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman" (pp. 5–6).

Looking back on the language courses at Queen's, Heaney also finds that Braidwood occasionally offered "a glimpse of the possibilities of escape from the entrapments of binary thinking. The Irish/ English antithesis, the Celtic/ Saxon duality, this was momentarily collapsed" ('Further Language', p. 6). For example, Braidwood would inform his students that the English word *whiskey* derived from the Irish and Gaelic word for water, *uisce*, and that the River Usk in England similarly had its name from the Gaelic *uisce*. Also, reading *Beowulf* for the class, Heaney recalls coming across

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[43] See 'Burns's Art Speech', p. 223, and Cathal Buí MacGiolla Ghunna, 'The Yellow Bittern' (transl. Seamus Heaney, in *The School Bag*, eds. Seamus Heaney & Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), pp. 349–51.

the word *tholian* — Old English for "to suffer" or "endure" — and gradually realising that it was a word he had heard before as a child, a word still in use among the older generation where he came from: "suddenly here it was in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt's language was not simply a self–enclosed family possession but an historical heritage" ('Further Language', p. 7). As I have noted earlier, in his essay 'Burns's Art Speech' Heaney argues how as a schoolboy, he had come to expect that "the language on the written page would take us out of our unofficial speaking selves and transport us to a land of formal words" (p. 218). However, this sense of cultural estrangement had been somewhat mitigated, he recalls, when he first saw Robert Burns and Northern Irish Gaelic poets like McGiolla Ghunna anthologised in the "high cultural" context of the school books at St. Columb's College. In the same way, opening his mind to the possibilities of an historic interrelationship between his local language heritage and the official word culture of English, Braidwood's classes were a further step towards a validation of Heaney's interest in English literature. In 'Further Language' Heaney notes: "I now realize that what I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with *thole* on its odyssey...was the feeling which Osip Mandelstam described as a "nostalgia for world culture." And it was a nostalgia I didn't even know I suffered until I experienced its fulfilment" (p. 8). In 'The Sounds of Rain' from *Seeing Things*, he also draws on the *Beowulf* incident, writing these lines in response to the death of the scholar Richard Ellmann:

> I dwelt without thinking
> In the long moil of it, and then came to
> To dripping eaves and light, saying into myself
> Proven, weightless sayings of the dead.
> Things like *He'll be missed* and *You'll have to thole.*
> (*Seeing Things*, p. 48.)

Evidently, the phrase "*You'll have to thole*" is culturally "Proven" to the poet in a double sense, and it allows his voice to operate on two levels: as a vernacular word, *thole* charges that last line with the intimacy of Heaney's private speaking self, expressing the grief over the death of a personal friend. But at the same time, *thole* functions as a canonised word that echoes back to *Beowulf*, firmly placing the poem within an established English language tradition, as a public tribute to a distinguished fellow writer.

Braidwood's teaching clearly set an important example, helping Heaney to find a way of negotiating between "the parish and the academy" (*Among Schoolchildren*, p. 8),

just as Heaney's Australian contemporary Les Murray has continually sought to relate the "peasant" and the "mandarin" in his works. That Braidwood has had a formative and long–lasting impact on Heaney's sense of an English–language heritage is also suggested by the poet's forthcoming translation of *Beowulf*, due to be published by Faber. Describing this project in a recent article for the *Sunday Times*, Heaney stressed how his own vernacular background has helped him to capture the tone and metre of the original text. Explaining his motives for translating *Beowulf*, he furthermore said:

> The study of the history of the English language and of Anglo–Saxon literary texts means something different now than it did when it was initiated in the 19th century. Within that older ideological frame, the tracing of Anglo–Saxon origins was as racial as it was linguistic; there was a definite patriotic purpose to it, a desire to establish the Anglo–Saxon element as a guarantee of an older, purer English line, separate from the Gallic and the Celtic strains that were always encroaching.[44]

Pointing to fellow writers like Murray and Derek Walcott as central figures in "a new order" of poets who "celebrate their local idiom as part of the polyphony that is English", he noted: "their linguistic independence [is] all the greater for being based upon a knowledge of the depth and distance from which their idiom has sprung":

> Walcott's sailor hero in his poem 'The Schooner *Flight*', for example, speaks his West Indian English in lines that echo the alliterative metre of 'Piers Plowman', which, in turn, is a direct development of the metre of *Beowulf*.
>
> It seems to me, in other words, that the study of Anglo–Saxon no longer identifies one with the cult of Englishness... Even a slight knowledge of Anglo–Saxon enforces a true, historically based, multi–cultural understanding (ibid.).

In 1961 Heaney graduated at Queen's with a First in English Language and Literature. The Head of the English Department, Peter Butter, encouraged him to accept a scholarship to go to Oxford, an offer he eventually declined:

> I remember just being bewildered, and my father and mother had absolutely no sense of that. They wouldn't have stopped me, I'm not saying that, but the world I was moving in didn't have any direction for them, the compass needle just *wobbled*...there was just some lack of confidence, and lack of *nous*, and lack of precedent.[45]

Instead, Heaney enrolled for a one–year Teaching Diploma course at St. Joseph College of Education in Belfast, an all–male Catholic college. As he says: "I suppose, too, that there was *some* expectation that I would earn, just because of that traditional shape of life — pay something back to the home, you know" (ibid.). In this way, choosing to stay in

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44 Seamus Heaney, 'Poet Explains Resonance of Anglo–Saxon Epic Poem', the *Sunday Times*, 26 July, 'Book Review', p. 6.

45 Seamus Heaney, quoted in Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 19.

Belfast and making teaching his vocation, Heaney had validated himself in the eyes of his own cultural hinterland. Later, in 1962, he registered as a part–time postgraduate student at his old department, intending to write a thesis on Rousseau's influence on Wordsworth's educational ideas (a project he did not complete, though).[46]

It was also during this period that Heaney began to familiarise himself with writers that had not been covered by the English syllabus at Queen's. After graduating, he started to read the works of Synge, Wilde and Louis MacNeice (*Parker*, p. 26). And as part of his Teachers Training course he wrote an extended essay on literary magazines in Northern Ireland, becoming acqainted with poets like W.R. Rodgers and John Hewitt.[47] Furthermore, he read for the first time Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, and discovered Hughes's *Lupercal* as well as the poetry of John Montague (*Parker*, pp. 39 and 44). Also, in the beginning of 1962 Heaney began his teaching practice at St. Thomas Intermediate School, where the short story writer Michael McLaverty was headmaster. McLaverty shared Heaney's interest in Hopkins, and furthermore introduced him to the works of the Scottish poet Edwin Muir. Heaney would eventually incorporate Muir in his own teaching, asking the students to look at two poems, 'Horses' (1925) and 'The Horses' (1959), and compare them to a passage about horses in Muir's autobiography[48] — an exercise he performs himself in his essay from 1989, 'The Place of Edwin Muir':

> [T]he late poem brings into focus an earlier premonition and combines it with the phantasmal recognitions of the adult living under atomic threat. Both his earlier poem (in quatrains) about the horses — published in 1925 and conjuring up a place he calls "that dread crystalline" — and the subsequent account of horses in *An Autobiography* are haunted by the old familiar sense of a consciousness undergoing experience which has not yet yielded up its meaning.[49]

In fact, Muir's "dread country crystalline,/ Where the blank field and the still–standing tree/ Were bright and fearful presences to me" (*Collected Poems*, p. 20), seems to correspond with Heaney's portrayal of his childhood terrain in 'Death of a Naturalist', where "the flax–dam festered in the heart/ Of the townland" (p. 5). The latent violent imagery in this early piece may also be taken as a premonition of the way in which Heaney has later articulated the cultural predicaments of Ulster in his mythologized

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46 Personal interview. See also Corcoran, ibid., p. 20, and *Parker*, p. 46.

47 *Parker*, p. 36. See also Robert Buttel, *Seamus Heaney* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 26.

48 Personal interview. Both 'Horses', from *First Poems* (1925), and 'The Horses', from *One Foot in Eden* (1959), appear in Edwin Muir's *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960). See also Muir's *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), pp. 22–3.

49 Seamus Heaney, 'The Place of Edwin Muir', *Verse*, 6.1, March 1989, p. 31.

bog–poems, such as 'The Tollund Man' from *Wintering Out*.

Expressing his general admiration for Muir, Heaney has stressed one particular aspect of his work: "[he] encompassed a double poetic origin in the oral tradition of Orkney and in the art poetry of the English language; and he speaks most surely as a poet when the resources of these two inheritances are brought fully into play" ('The Place of Edwin Muir', p. 23). Such an observation clearly reveals Heaney's own concern with negotiating between one's indigenous regional heritage and a wider literary tradition, and it suggests how he has come to see Muir as another representative of the "Peasant Mandarin". However, it is worth noting that what Heaney diagnoses positively as a productive duality between the "peasant" and the "mandarin" in Muir's poetry, also reflects a central cultural dilemma which has generally haunted Scottish writing in English. In his 1936 study *Scott and Scotland*, Muir wrote of "a general disposition in Scotland to blame Scottish writers who turn to the English tradition", and argued against notions of a distinct, self–sustainable Scottish tradition, echoing sentiments voiced two decades earlier by Eliot:

> a Scottish writer who wishes to achieve some approximation to completeness has no choice except to absorb the English tradition, and...if he thoroughly does so his work belongs not merely to Scottish literature but to English literature as well. On the other hand, if he wishes to add to an indigenous Scottish literature...he will find...[no] major literary tradition to support him, nor even a faith among the people themselves that a Scottish literature is possible or desirable.[50]

Another important poet whose work Michael McLaverty introduced Heaney to was Patrick Kavanagh.[51] It is interesting to observe, though, that already in 1960 Heaney had written a student poem called 'Aran', which bears some resemblance to Kavanagh's stark exposition of rural working–life in *The Great Hunger*. Compared to Heaney's other student works, 'Aran' avoids any pseudo–Keatsian flights of the soul, and tries instead to convey the concrete barrenness of the landscape:

> The rock breaks out like bone from a skinned elbow
> And the island coughs itself into high cliffs

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50 Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland — The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1936), p. 15. As Cairns Craig also points out in *Out of History* (ed. cit., pp. 14–7), these ideas were clearly informed by Eliot's essay from 1919, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?'.

51 According to Michael Parker, Heaney read Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* already at university (*Parker*, p. 31). However, Heaney has confirmed to me that he first heard of him in 1962, when McLaverty lent him a copy of *A Soul for Sale* (Personal interview). This is also apparent from his interview with James Randall (*Ploughshares*, p. 14). It was not until the mid–1960s, it seems, that Kavanagh was being offered for study at Queen's. Hobsbaum, who took up his lectureship in 1963, recalls that he began to teach *The Great Hunger*, having to use duplicated sheets as the poem had been banned in the Republic, and was hard to obtain.

.....

Here the people live the necessary life.
They feed and worship.....
.....
...as he digs, the islander's spade spangs off rocks.[52]

Any sense of pastoral beauty is negated with lines like: "The knifing wind shivers, but no tree rustles/ No sedge whispers; only the numb rocks,/ The dumb squat houses acknowledge it with indifference."

Reading 'Aran' one is also reminded of the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. But again, Heaney maintains that he did not know any of Thomas's poetry until 1962, when A. Alvarez's highly influential anthology *The New Poetry* came out (Personal interview). In addition to R. S. Thomas, *The New Poetry* also opened his eyes to Norman MacCaig,[53] and the influence of both these exemplars shows in Heaney's poem 'Welfare State', which appeared in May 1963 in *Interest*, a newly started Belfast journal:

Old men in distant country summers
Who bent fierce backs among the crackled peat
Would straighten up to fire sour clay pipes,
Gaunt as Celtic crosses in the sky; listen
To silent hills strumming the horizon.[54]

These lines seem to have been prompted by R. S. Thomas's 'A Peasant', which was included in *The New Poetry*. Heaney's "Old men.../Who bent fierce backs among the crackled peat" bear a strong affinity with Thomas's Iago Prytherch, "churning the crude earth/ To a stiff sea of clods".[55] Thomas's character is "a winner of wars,/ Enduring like a tree under the curious stars", as are Heaney's old men, whose "straight–backed lull/ From stooping pillared them into majesty." Heaney's phrase "among the crackled peat" even chimes with Thomas's "the sun that cracks the cheeks", and his fourth line furthermore echoes the "gaunt sky" from 'A Peasant'. Finally, the image of the people in 'Welfare State' as "gaunt...Celtic crosses" can also be ascribed to Norman MacCaig's 'Celtic Cross', which is also "gaunt", and bears witness of past "men's minds".[56]

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52 Seamus Heaney, 'Aran', *Gorgon*, No. 4, February 1960, p. 7.

53 After MacCaig's death, Heaney wrote an obituary for *The Scotsman* ('A Poet Remembered', 'Books Magazine', 27 January 1996, p. 16), in which he recalls how he initially came across MacCaig's poem 'Summer Farm' in a BBC Schools Radio Pamphlet in the early 1960s. Alvarez's anthology, however, presented him with a selection of five MacCaig pieces, as well as ten poems by R.S. Thomas.

54 Seamus Heaney, 'Welfare State', *Interest*, May 1963, p. 16.

55 R.S. Thomas, 'A Peasant', *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 4.

56 Norman MacCaig, 'Celtic Cross', *Collected Poems*, New ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p.69.

Familiarising himself with such writers after leaving Queen's, Heaney clearly paved the way for a further reconciliation with his own regional background. Helping to affirm "the rich stratifications of the English language itself" (*Preoccupations*, p. 46), they showed how the poetic medium had the strength to encompass a variety of indigenous experiences. Particularly in the works of Patrick Kavanagh, John Montague, Ted Hughes, Edwin Muir, R.S. Thomas and Norman MacCaig, Heaney saw contemporary examples of how an English pastoral tradition could be appropriated, to produce what he describes in a 1975 review article as "counter–cultural celebration[s] of simpler life–styles".[57] Warning in this article against dismissing "the further possibilities" of the pastoral in the twentieth century, he evokes several of these names as natural successors to John Clare, whose feat it was as an English poet to "make vocal the regional and particular, to achieve a buoyant and authentic lyric utterance at the meeting–point between social realism and conventional romanticism".[58] Another poet whom Heaney also includes in this company is Edward Thomas, whose works he started reading in 1963 (Personal Interview). Heaney recalls that he was particularly fond of Thomas's 'Lob', a poem preoccupied with ancestry and digging, and 'As the Team's Head Brass', which is about ploughing.[59]

The immediate impact of these writers also manifested itself in the poems Heaney wrote while attending the Belfast Creative Writing Group, which was instigated by Philip Hobsbaum in 1963. Having arrived the previous year to prepare for his lectureship at the English Department, Hobsbaum spent 1962 to 1963 "not running a group, but planning to run one". During the late 1950s he had already been involved in 'the Group' in London, another writing workshop, which included people like Alan Brownjohn, Edward Lucie–Smith and Peter Redgrove. This venture led to the publication of *A Group Anthology*, which Heaney happened to review for *Interest* in May 1963. Clearly writing with an objective, Heaney here voiced his hopes that Hobsbaum would start a similar

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57 Seamus Heaney, 'In the Country of Convention', review of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, eds. John Barrel and John Bull (London: Allen Lane, 1975), *Preoccupations*, p. 180.

58 Ibid. See also Heaneys more recent discussion of Clare's local idiom in 'John Clare's Prog', *The Redress of Poetry*, pp. 63–82.

59 In the latter case, the lines "I watched the clods crumble and topple over/ After the ploughshare and the stumbling team" (Edward Thomas,*Collected Poems*, ed. R.G. Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 327) are clearly echoed in Heaney's early poem 'At a Potato Digging', where the labourers "stumble back/ ...from the crumbled surf" (*Death of a Naturalist*, p. 31). In Thomas's *Collected Poems*, it is also striking to find poems with such Heaney–sounding titles as 'The Barn', 'Haymaking', and 'Digging', in which "I think/ only with scents," "Odours that rise/ When the spade wounds the roots of tree" (p. 169). Similarly, Thomas's 'Aspens' seems to anticipate Heaney's 'The Forge' from *Door into the Dark*, when "Out of the blacksmith's cavern comes the ringing/ Of hammer, shoe, and anvil" (p. 233).

enterprise in Belfast.[60]

In October that year the Belfast Group had its inaugural meeting, and George Watson notes:

> I know it was important for Seamus and others to have a sense that this English outsider was validating the things they were doing... At least, Hobsbaum created a space in which people could come and say: "Actually, I do like poetry!"

This has also been corroborated by several of the Group's participants. Although he only attended one session, Derek Mahon has said: "The Hobsbaum seminar...was probably first to crystallise the sense of a new Northern poetry. Here was this man from London, people thought, whose name and whose friends' names appeared in leading journals, and he's actually taking us *seriously*."[61] Similarly, Heaney finds that Hobsbaum helped people to undergo the transformation from being "craven provincials" to "genuine parochials" (*Preoccupations*, p. 29). Although Hobsbaum denies that there ever was a group aesthetic or talk of some sort of artistic manifesto, Heaney remembers that Hobsbaum was "a strong believer in the bleeding hunk of experience" (*Ploughshares*, p. 15), an observation that is shared by several of the Group's members. In 1976 *The Honest Ulsterman* published 'The Belfast Group: a Symposium', in which one contributor noted: "Honest–to–God Ulster down–to–earthness was encouraged...poetic flight of extravagant vision and imagination were frowned upon as "Pretentious"."[62] Michael Longley, who was a regular attender, also felt that he was encouraged to think of himself as a "degenerate sophisticate": "Hobsbaum's aesthetic demanded gritty particularity, an unrhetorical utterance...I believed then that poetry should be polished, metrical and rhymed; oblique rather than head–on; imagistic and symbolic rather than rawly factual; rhetorical rather than documentary" (ibid., pp. 56–7). Similarly, Mahon's impression after attending once was that Hobsbaum was "Too Leavisite and too contentious, intolerant".[63] Here it should also be noted, though, that as former Classics students from Trinity College in Dublin, both Longley and Mahon had already been exposed to a different literary milieu. As Edna Longley points out in *The Living Stream*, Hobsbaum's Belfast advent diverged from the aesthetic priorities nurtured in Dublin,

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60 Seamus Heaney, 'In Print', review of *A Group Anthology*, ed. Edward Lucie–Smith & Philip Hobsbaum (Oxford University Press), *Interest*, May 1963, p. 30.

61 Derek Mahon, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies*, No. 4, November 1970, p. 91.

62 'The Belfast Group: a Symposium', *The Honest Ulsterman*, No. 53, November–December 1976, p. 58.

63 Derek Mahon, interview with William Scammell, *Poetry Review*, 81.2, Summer 1991, p. 4.

"where, for instance, Lowell represented a walk on the wild side and Larkin's dialogue with Yeats struck more chords than his relation to Kingsley Amis."[64] Rather than being influenced by a 1950s English poetic climate, Longley's and Mahon's verses showed from the beginning a preference for a more metaphysical kind of writing.

Hobsbaum ran the Belfast Group between 1963–66, and during this period Heaney submitted 49 poems for discussion, being the most prolific contributor. (Out of these poems, 19 later appeared in *Death of a Naturalist*, seven were published in *Door into the Dark*, and one, 'Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966', appeared in *North*.)[65] Given his interest in the antipastoralism of poets like Kavanagh, Montague and R.S. Thomas, it is not surprising that his work struck a chord with Hobsbaum's preference for "the bleeding hunk of experience". Several of his poems in the Group Sheets, such as 'A Pillar of the Community', 'MacKenna's Saturday Night' and 'Men's Confessions', portray the life of Derry farmers and generally aim for a documentary explicitness. This is often aided by Heaney's use of direct or reported speech, as in 'The Early Purges': "I was six when I first saw kittens drown./ Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',/ Into a bucket."[66] This also generates a verbal roughness that counterbalances Heaney's inclination at other instances to revert to a metrical smoothness. It is significant that while his student verses suffered from a lack of formal structuring, many of these Group poems deploy traditional forms, such as the quatrain, or the rhyming couplets in 'Young Bachelor':

> From the mantelpiece my lecture programme stares,
> Five days all neatly chopped into squares.
>
> This timetable dictates the way I spend
> Five nights a week and much of the weekend.
> (Group Sheets.)

Thus, while seeking to evoke his rural Derry background by using sturdy rhythms and sounds to accommodate his own dialect, Heaney also drew heavily on a canonical English lyric tradition. Indeed, commentators on his early works have tended to discuss them primarily in this context. Reviewing *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966, for instance,

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64 Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 19.

65 'Belfast Creative Writing Group: Group Sheets 1963–66'. The complete file is held in the Queen's University Library.

66 Seamus Heaney, 'The Early Purges', Group Sheets; subsequently published in *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 34.

Christopher Ricks stressed the influence of Robert Graves,[67] clearly thinking of a love poem like 'Scaffolding'. And to a certain extent this bias is valid, particularly when considering some of the weaker, more imitative pieces in the collection. In the first stanza of 'In Small Townlands', for instance, Heaney inverts the syntax in order to thump along in iambics, and the result is a strikingly archaic English note which threatens to reduce the poem to mere bathos: "crystal in the rock is bared:/ Loaded brushes hone an edge/ On mountain blue and heather grey" (*Death of a Naturalist*, p. 54). Similarly, 'The Play Way' draws attention to itself through an uneasy use of Eliot in the line "Mixing memory and desire with chalk dust" (ibid., p. 56).

However, as Bernard O'Donoghue makes clear, such a critical bias is problematic when considering the collection at large, and especially when trying to understand the metrical qualities in Heaney's more accomplished, rugged poems. In fact, what O'Donoghue shows is that Heaney's early voice consciously draws on two traditions, creating its aural roughness not merely through a deliberate use of consonants, but also by translating metrical and syllabic qualities of Gaelic verse into English.[68] At the turn of the century, Yeats and other writers belonging to the Celtic Revival had already experimented with the seven–syllable lines of Irish *Deibidhe* poems, and also been attentive to the inclination in Gaelic to give prominence to metrically unstressed syllables. In addition, they occasionally deployed *Deibidhe* rhymes, which O'Donoghue describes as "the elegant, but initially very rough and un–English, rhyming of a monosyllable with a disyllable on a syllable other than the stressed one" (p. 31).

Rereading Daniel Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* in the early 1960s (*Parker*, p. 39), Heaney would have known about the Celtic Revivalists and their formal experimentations. But more importantly, perhaps, John Montague's poetry offered a more contemporary example of these metrical practices. Montague often employs seven–syllable lines and occasional *Deibidhe* rhymes like "downstream/ dream".[69] Certain of his lines also defy iambic scansion: typically, there is a juxtaposition of stresses as in "Minute fish flickered as *one dipped*," "*One stood* until the bucket brimmed".[70] A similar rhythmic effect marks several of Heaney's early poems, such as 'Blackberry Picking': "and on top big dark

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67 Christopher Ricks, 'Growing Up', review of *Death of a Naturalist*, *New Statesman*, 27 May 1966, p. 778.

68 I am indebted here to the discussion in chapter 1 of *O'Donoghue*, entitled 'English or Irish Lyric'.

69 John Montague, 'The Trout', *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Paul Muldoon (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 178.

70 John Montague, 'The Water Carrier', ibid., p. 177. Emphases added.

blobs burned" (*Opened Ground*, p. 8), and 'Digging': "He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep" (ibid., p. 3). Although there is a perceived iambic pulse in these lines, it is disturbed by the positioning of the words "big", "blobs", "tall" and "edge", which due to their lexical prominence require some degree of stress. Furthermore, as O'Donoghue also points out, the final line in 'Digging' — "I'll dig with it" — requires a primary stress on "it", a word which he finds "can take stress *only* in a Northern Irish accent" (*O'Donoghue*, p. 42). Clearly, seen in the context of an English lyric tradition, such effects appear as irregularities, and O'Donoghue also draws attention to several metrical misreadings of Heaney's language in *Death of a Naturalist* (pp. 36–41). Further to his argument, it is worth noting that one of the first commentators to point to the dialect–based stress pattern in the last line of 'Digging' was Les Murray, who said in an interview:

> The first poem of [Heaney's] I ever saw...ended with the words 'I'll dig with it' (emphasis on 'it'), and I read that and said 'Yeah, and I bet they can't read that in England'. It sounded like 'I'll dig with it' (emphasis on 'dig'), and it ruined the line completely. Although we weren't speaking with an Irish accent, we remembered what it sounded like and 'I'll dig with it' (emphasis on 'it') is perfectly good Australian English.[71]

But again, it is understandable that critics preoccupied with the metrical practices in *Death of a Naturalist* tend to have overlooked the Irish element, which is largely submerged in traditionally English forms. And while Heaney often uses *Deibidhe* rhymes ('Blackberry Picking' alone has *sun/ ripen*, *sweet/ in it*, *for/ hunger* and *jam–pots/ boots*), he seldom deploys seven–syllable lines. Clearly, this deliberate use of two traditions was part of Heaney's attempt to forge a personal voice. It can be seen as his way of taking Eliot's advice and balance the individual talent with an informed sense of tradition, of drawing on the mandarinate without renouncing the culture of the vernacular peasant.

Although Michael Longley notes that Heaney's work fitted Hobsbaum's bill of "gritty particularity" especially well,[72] Heaney was also susceptible to Longley's more symbolically visionary and rhetorical style of writing. During his time with the Group, he wrote 'A Personal Helicon', a poem dedicated to Longley, which later appeared in *Death of a Naturalist*. The final piece, it concludes the collection on this note:

> Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
> To stare, big–eyed Narcissus, into some spring
> Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme

71 Les Murray, in 'Poets' Round Table — 'A Common Language'' (op. cit.), p. 45.

72 Michael Longley, in 'The Belfast Group: a Symposium', *The Honest Ulsterman* (op. cit.), p. 56.

> To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 15.)

Heaney here seems to express a wish to gravitate towards a more oblique, symbolic–laden voice, and the phrase "to set the darkness echoing" portends the more introverted stance in *Door into the Dark*, where he begins to "raid the inarticulate".[73] The example of Norman MacCaig also influenced Heaney in this direction, away from the rawly factual and towards a more metaphysical treatment of experience. The Group sheets include 'The Peninsula', which was later published in *Door into the Dark*:

> When you have nothing more to say, just drive
> For a day round the peninsula.
> The sky is tall as over a runway,
> The land without marks, so you will not arrive
>
> But pass through, though always skirting landfall.
> At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,
> The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable
> And you're in the dark again. Now recall
>
> The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log,
> That rock where breakers shredded into rags,
> The leggy birds stilted out on their legs,
> Islands riding themselves out into the fog,
>
> And drive back home, still with nothing to say
> Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
> By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,
> Water and ground in their extremity.
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 21.)

'The Peninsula' seems to correspond closely with MacCaig's 'Ardmore' from *A Common Grace* (1960), where:

> The track that stops there is a final one.
> So absolute its ending that it seems
> What other tracks are lesser copies of
> — Paradigm of them all. The sea, the sun
> Are the next stage, with nothing in between.
> A quick place this to know your journey's done.[74]

In both poems the journey extends itself into a metaphysical experience, the mind taking over where the senses stop short. In Heaney's poem "You will not arrive but pass through", as dusk renders the landscape "without marks". Similarly, in 'Ardmore', although the "journey's done", the "direction...goes on/ Beyond the wild rose and the

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[73] The phrase occurs in Heaney's essay 'Feeling into Words', *Preoccupations*, p. 47.

[74] Norman MacCaig, 'Ardmore', *Collected Poems* (op. cit.), p. 74.

barking dog/ With a bird's rush to soar out into space", showing "which lie" the finiteness of the journey is. In 'The Peninsula' the experience leaves us "with nothing to say", and in MacCaig's poem "The sea rips in between two claws of stone/ Or races out, as meaning does with words." In another poem from *A Common Grace*, 'Inverkirkaig Bay', MacCaig opens with an image of dusk which resembles Heaney's "Islands riding themselves out into the fog": "Colour is comment of the cheating eye./ This bay, these islands walk themselves away/.../To an odd world where the senses never pry" (ibid., p. 82).

Through his affiliation with the Belfast Creative Writing Group, then, and through his familiarisation with a wider range of exemplars than what the English course at Queen's had provided, Heaney spent 1961–1966 deepening his sense of the poetic medium as being capable of accommodating a variety of vernacular experiences. In 1966, he was appointed as a lecturer at his old university department, and judging from the University Calendars, this was a period when the English Department changed its profile radically. The previous year the chair had been taken over by John Harvey, and the teaching staff had doubled since Heaney was a student — from seven to fourteen members.[75] There were now several teachers with an Irish or Northern Irish background, such as John Cronin and Edna Longley. Speaking of these changes at Queen's, Heaney notes that they generally reflected "the social and educational vitality of [the] decade" ('Further Language', p. 3). During the 1960s Northern Ireland was gradually waking up to the cultural diversities that had for long been repressed. With the emergence of the Troubles, a Minister of Community Relations was appointed by the British Government, and a commission was set up to concern itself with the amelioration of those relations. Particularly among those writers and broadcasters living in the region, Heaney sensed a pressing need to address the problems, to open up "the received language" and find a way of "crediting the reality of division and discrimination within the society without getting trapped in the recriminations and stock responses which the old sectarian idiom entailed" (ibid., p. 4). In this way, the local BBC Schools Broadcasting Service started to produce series like "The Course of Irish History" and "Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland". Through his friend David Hammond, who worked for the BBC, Heaney was himself commissioned to contribute to a series called "Over to You", which was intended for

[75] *Queen's University Calendars* 1965/ 1966 (Belfast: Queen's University).

pupils in secondary schools and was broadcast all over Britain.[76]

When Heaney started lecturing in 1966, the syllabus at Queen's had also changed considerably since his student years. In 1965 the first year course covered literature from 1840 to 1920, and included Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* and *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* as its set texts. The following year, Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot were added, and Hardy's prose was replaced by his poetry.[77] Also, in Heaney's first year as a lecturer an Honours course called "Anglo–Irish Literature Since 1800" was introduced, and eventually he became involved in teaching it ('Further Language', p. 3). Initially, though, he primarily taught British and Irish poetry to First Arts students. What was most important to him, he recalls, was to be able to meet the students "on their own wavelength, to speak to them in their own voice, and to get more Irish Literature into the syllabus" (Personal Interview). In 'Further Language', he notes:

> I well remember the feeling of taboo–breaking I experienced when I began to ask students in those First Arts tutorials who had come to Queen's from differently segregated schools and colleges whether they thought it mattered if you were a Catholic or a Protestant when it came to reading James Joyce (p. 4).

Some of the writers represented in the syllabus would turn out to have a crucial influence on Heaney's further development as a "Peasant Mandarin" negotiating with the English tradition. As I have shown, Heaney had at an early stage familiarised himself with the 'hallowed' English names, as well as with poets whose voices somehow chimed with his own regional consciousness. While it is important to stress his genuine susceptibility to the English lyric, it is also evident that it challenged his cultural pieties. His artistic stance as a Northern Irish Catholic who has taken the English language and literature into his possession has from the beginning been insistent. And yet, in his earliest works that insistence is clearly accompanied by a sense of timidity, as the epithet "Incertus" with which he signed his student poems also indicates. However, teaching *British* poetry to Irish students at Queen's in the mid–1960s seemed to pave the way to the growing self–assurance with which Heaney has made use of the English tradition ever since.

Having to teach the works of Wilfred Owen at Queen's, Heaney began to open his eyes to what he has described as "a different kind of accuracy, a moral

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[76] See *Parker*, p. 53. As Parker notes, the series became highly popular among teachers and students, although "back in London objections were lodged about the number of regional accents and Irish references in the programmes".

[77] *Queen's University Calendars* 1966/ 1967 (Belfast: Queen's University).

down–to–earthness".[78] In such war poems as 'Dulce et Decorum Est' he encountered an "impulse to elevate truth above beauty, to rebuke the sovereign claims which art would make for itself, caricatured in the figure of Nero, the singer and player culpably absorbed in his melodies while his city burns around him" (*The Government of the Tongue*, p. xviii). Particularly towards the end of the 1960s, with the outbreak of the Troubles and the arrival of the British Army in Northern Ireland, Owen's example must have presented itself with great moral urgency, questioning Heaney's art. Initially it seems that Owen's "impulse to elevate truth above beauty" was primarily emulated by Heaney in the number of articles he wrote for *The Listener* in the late 1960s/ early 1970s. Dealing with the current Ulster crisis, he sought in his journalistic reports to overcome the sectarian rhetoric which infested the Northern Ireland debate.[79] However, with *North* (1975) Heaney exhibits an urge to adopt Owen's autonomous stance as a poet, in order to be able to expose the human suffering taking place in Ulster. In part one of this collection, he chooses to speak through the mask of Antaeus, that cultural indigene who keeps his strength by staying in touch with the ground that nurtured him. Constricting himself to slender quatrains, Heaney deliberately keeps striking inwards into the linguistic and mythopoetic terrain of *Wintering Out*, reading the ground like a braille. Eventually, the poet envisages himself as "Hamlet the Dane", the "skull–handler" who is "pinioned by ghosts/ and affections", "murders and pieties",[80] and he subsequently calls upon Tacitus to:

> Come back to this
> 'island of the ocean'
> where nothing will suffice.
> Read the inhumed faces
>
> of casualty and victim;
> report us fairly,
> how we slaughter
> for the common good
>
> and shave the heads
> of the notorious,
> how the goddess swallows
> our love and terror.[81]

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[78] Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1995), p. 12. See also his essay 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Checkov's Cognac and a Knocker', in *The Government of the Tongue*.

[79] See for instance 'Old Derry Walls', *The Listener*, 24 October 1968, pp. 521–3, and 'Views', *The Listener*, 31 December 1970, p. 903.

[80] Seamus Heaney, 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces, IV', *Opened Ground*, p. 104.

[81] Seamus Heaney, 'Kinship, VI', ibid., pp. 125–6.

In the concluding piece of the first section in *North*, Hercules, "Sky–born and royal," enters and conquers Antaeus by lifting him into the air, turning him into "pap for the dispossessed" ('Hercules and Antaeus', ibid., pp. 129–30). Signalling the change in voice of the second section, this poem bears a strong resemblance to Owen's fragment of a poem entitled 'Antaeus':

> So neck to stubborn neck, and obstinate knee to knee,
> Wrestled those two; and peerless Heracles
> Could not prevail, nor get at any vantage...
> .....
> ... Then anger swelled in Heracles,
> And terribly he grapples broader arms,
> And up his back the muscles bulged and shone
> Like climing banks and domes of towering cloud.[82]

In *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* — which Heaney used at Queen's (see *The Government of the Tongue*, p. xiii) — this poem is accompanied by an excerpt of a letter, in which Owen describes Antaeus's strength:

> How Earth herself empowered him with her touch,
> Gave him the grip and stringency of Winter,
> And all the ardour of th' invincible Spring;
> How all the blood of June glutted his heart.

It seems that Heaney must have struck upon the idea of using the figures of Hercules and Antaeus from reading Owen. In fact, Heaney's 'Antaeus' dates from 1966, the year he began lecturing at Queen's. And by echoing Owen and his use of classic mythology, Heaney defines his own position rather ingeniously in *North*: on the one hand, as a Northern Irish poet he links himself to an English lyric tradition and its Western heritage. But at the same time, Owen stands as an English poet who felt compelled to strike his own path when faced with the atrocities of World War I, refusing to conform his art to the standards dictated by his Georgian contemporaries. Similarly, in an interview from 1973 Heaney told Harriet Cooke that, as an Northern Irish poet writing in the context of the Troubles, he now saw "the necessity...to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff it had never eaten before".[83]

In part two of *North*, Heaney engages much more directly with the situation in

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82 Wilfred Owen, 'Antaeus', *Collected Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis, with a memoir by Edmund Blunden (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p. 120. (All subsequent quotations from Owen's verse are from this edition.)

83 Seamus Heaney, interview with Harriet Cooke, *Irish Times*, 28 December 1973, p. 8.

Northern Ireland, following the stance taken in Owen's war poetry. "'Description is revelation!'" we are told in 'Fosterage' (*Opened Ground*, p. 142), and the introverted lyric communing of part one is replaced by a much more declarative, documentary voice, as the slender stanzaic patterns give way to longer lines with a more 'prosey' flow: "I'm writing just after an encounter/ With an English journalist in search of 'views/ On the Irish thing'" ('Whatever You Say Say Nothing', p. 131). But as it turns out, Owen presents himself not so much as an exemplar as a shadow that challenges Heaney's art in *North*. As Heaney himself points out in *The Government of the Tongue*, Owen wrote with the authenticity of experience: he "suffered the strain of performing what most people perceived to be their unquestionable duty in order to gain the right to question whether it was duty at all...he earned the right to his lines by going up the line" (p. xv). In contrast:

> While the Constabulary covered the mob
> Firing into the Falls, I was suffering
> Only the bullying sun of Madrid.
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 140.)

Heaney's detachment from the violence in Belfast is concrete and physical. And out of a sense of guilt, he retreats to "the cool of the Prado" to confront himself with the example of Goya, who, like Owen, experienced war in order to expose its atrocities. Both appear as martyrs who obliterated the distinction between life and art. But in the course of doing so, Owen also repudiated the notion of art itself. In Heaney's words, he "affirmed that his poems would have nothing to do with this complacent, acceptable version of the beautiful which he contemptuously calls 'Poetry'" (*The Government of the Tongue*, p. xiii). Heaney, who has exiled himself to the medium of art in order to overcome his cultural pieties and portray the sufferings in Northern Ireland from a humane, universal perspective, is challenged by this. Significantly, the concluding piece of *North*, 'Exposure', reads as a dialogue with Owen's poem of the same title. Again, Owen's 'Exposure' is a war poem, describing the tense waiting in the trenches: "The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow.../ We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy" (pp. 48–9). The tension is suspended through the repetition of phrases like "But nothing happens", and "What are we doing here?" Similarly, Heaney asks in his poem: "How did I end up like this?", evoking the same exhausted atmosphere: "Alders dripping, birches/ Inheriting the last light,/ The ash tree cold to look at" (*Opened Ground*, p. 143). However, while Owen speaks of the experience of being at the epicentre of human atrocity, Heaney has "Escaped from the massacre", "neither internee nor informer;/ An

inner émigré" who is guilt–ridden:

> As I sit weighing and weighing
> My responsible *tristia*.
> For what? For the ear? For the people?
> For what is said behind–backs?
> (pp. 143–4.)

This is far from being a renunciation of art in favour of life, of beauty in favour of truth. Rather, Owen's example is used as a moral bleeper to remind the artist to maintain a life–line between art and reality. If Heaney questions his own personal achievement as a poet in 'Exposure', he still affirms his belief in the potential of art,

> Imagining a hero
> On some muddy compound,
> His gift like a slingstone
> Whirled for the desperate.

This seems to be his answer to the questions raised by Owen's work, and it draws on Robert Frost's notion of poets as giants "always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it from somewhere".[84] Whereas Owen's poems "were meant to outrage rather than console" (*The Government of the Tongue*, p. xiii), Heaney believes that art is capable of both. Lecturing on Owen at Queen's, he also recalls that

> I was not only concerned that the socio–political testimony of poets be apprehended by the students; I was also concerned with what was artistically good as well as what was generally true. And it seemed to me that *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, a poem which it was easy for them to like, was the poem where I could engage them with the question of over–writing... However hangdog I might feel about such intrusions, I also felt that it was right to raise questions (ibid.).

Retaining his mandarin belief in art, the Heaney we see in *North* consequently also writes with a great sense of fidelity to his medium, the English lyric. The later Owen, disillusioned by what he had experienced at the front, would undoubtedly have rejected his own pre–war lyrics as complacent gestures to equal truth with beauty. In response, Heaney ratifies Owen's initial trust in art, using his early Antaeus–fragment as a framework for expressing the predicaments of Ulster, for opening up the range of the English lyric and giving the sectarian experience in Northern Ireland a voice.

Some of the other poets that Heaney found himself teaching for the British

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84 Robert Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes', introduction to his *Complete Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), p. 19. This passage is also quoted by Heaney in 'The Place of Edwin Muir', p. 31.

Literature course at Queen's also contributed to this development, helping to affirm his belief in what he has later defined as "art's/ deliberate, peremptory/ love and arrogance".[85] One important exemplar was Yeats. In his interview with James Randall, Heaney notes: "It was only when I started to teach Yeats after about 1966 that I began to think about him and it was not really until 1970–75 that I confronted him in any way" (*Ploughshares*, p. 14). Thus, Thomas Foster has argued that Heaney's mythologising of the Troubles in his bog poems of the early 1970s was clearly inspired by Yeats and his development of a coherent mythology in 1917.[86] But also the overall dialectical structure of *North*, personified in the use of Hercules and Antaeus, drew on Yeats's use of masks and his notion that poetry rises out the quarrel with ourselves. Here, though, it is important to see Heaney's Yeats as an Irish poet working within an English lyric tradition. Michael Allen recalls Heaney's insistence as a lecturer at Queen's that "modern *British* poetry starts with Yeats". In his essay from 1978, 'The Makings of a Music' (*Preoccupations*), he also compared Yeats with Wordsworth, and most recently, in 'Dylan the Durable?', he pointed out: "Yeats in the 1890s punted into the scene on the Celtic current, but, once in the swim, he used his mystique to initiate a counter–cultural move within English poetry itself" (*The Redress of Poetry*, p. 126).

Another important figure with whom Heaney reconciled himself at this stage was Eliot. As mentioned earlier, reading Eliot's prose as student had been a formative experience, while his poetry remained a "buzz word for obscurity" ('Learning from Eliot', p. 18). Heaney's early panic in the face of Eliot's verse "was not just schoolboy panic":

> It descended again in my late twenties when I had to lecture on 'Ash–Wednesday'...at Queen's University, Belfast. I had no access to the only reliable source for such teaching, namely, the experience of having felt the poem come home, memorably and irrefutably, so the lecture was one of the most unnerving forty–five minutes of my life (ibid., p. 21).

But his reluctance towards Eliot's obscurity was also nurtured by a general notion about the social function of poetry. In his Nobel speech, Heaney notes that his "more or less costive attitudes were fortified by a refusal to grant the poet any more license than any other citizen" (*Crediting Poetry*, p. 13). Behind this lies a scepticism towards the intellectual strain of mandarinism found in the works of the modernists, and it can be linked to Heaney's early experience of having to negotiate the gap between the parish and

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[85] Seamus Heaney, 'Elegy' (in memoriam Robert Lowell), *Field Work* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 31.

[86] Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: the O'Brien Press, 1989), p. 31.

the academy. As is apparent elsewhere in this study, it is a scepticism that he has shared with other post–war regional writers, such as Les Murray and Tony Harrison.

What helped Heaney open his eyes in the mid–1960s to both Yeats and Eliot was C. K. Stead's study from 1964, *The New Poetic*.[87] In *The New Poetic*, Stead argues that Yeats and Eliot were the two key figures responsible for re–introducing a wholeness of poetic sensibility at the turn of the century. Around this time English poetry had largely reduced itself to a populistic artform, as exemplified by the discursive, patriotic verses of people like Kipling and Newbolt — the same poets who had induced Owen to repudiate poetry as a morally irresponsible artform. According to Stead, Yeats and Eliot not so much challenged the English poetic tradition itself, as they challenged the moral and aesthetic limitations inflicted upon it by an Edwardian society. Refusing to weigh aesthetics over morals or vice versa, they strove for an exposition of the full human condition, while turning away from the discourse and towards the image instead. *The New Poetic* became part of the syllabus at Queen's in the 1960s,[88] and to Heaney, Stead "revealed Eliot as a much more intuitive kind of writer than the commentaries had allowed one to believe" ('Learning from Eliot', p. 29). Suddenly he realised that a poem like *The Waste Land* was not a discourse with links missing, but that it represents "an emergence of the ungainsayable and symbolically radiant out of the subconscious deep" (*The Government of the Tongue*, p. 92). Similarly, Stead's reading also informed Heaney's perception of Yeats:

> Yeats had a notion of the relation of the artist to his community which was very strong. He had a belief in the efficacy of art as a binding force for a community. He had a belief in images; you know, if you get the right image, you bind the group together with it. And that kind of thing was important to me because I thought to myself..."when people are killing one another, what are *you* doing?"[89]

Evidently, Stead's exposition of Yeats and Eliot as poets who maintained their social responsibility, while insisting on granting poetry its autonomy, set a great precedence for Heaney. If *North* explores the tensions between art and life, focusing on the Troubles and generally being haunted by Owen's example, his next collection, *Field Work*, reaffirms a Yeatsian and Eliotic belief in the efficacy of art. One of the most striking features of this book is its trust in the redemptive power of the image, something that is furthered by Heaney's unprecedented use of Dante. In the concluding piece,

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87 C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson, 1964).

88 Personal interview with Michael Allen.

89 Seamus Heaney, interview with Robert Druce, *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 9.1, 1979, p. 27.

'Ugolino', which is a translation of cantos xxxii and xxxiii from the *Inferno*, Dante's portrayal of Count Ugolino gnawing on the skull of another is deployed as an emblem of the Troubles (*Opened Ground*, pp. 187–90). Similarly, in 'Triptych', Heaney addresses the situation in Northern Ireland by invoking a Sibyl who judges that "our very form is bound to change./ Dogs in a siege. Saurian relapses. Pismires." Subsequently, she offers this vision of salvation:

> Unless forgivenness finds its nerve and voice,
> Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
> Can green and open buds like infants' fists
> And the fouled magma incubate
>
> Bright nymphs.
> (*Opened Ground*, p. 148.)

This is a bold image that grows out of the Antaean landscape and into the light of a universal conscience. And not only does the sibylline nature of such passages point towards Dante: it also reminds us of the way in which Eliot turned to him as a master of poetic and visionary lucidity. Heaney's tree of convalescence and regeneration bears a strong resemblance to Eliot's axle tree in *Four Quartets*: "At the still point of the turning world", "Where past and future are gathered", and where one finds "The inner freedom from practical desire/ The release from action and suffering".[90]

From *Field Work* and onwards, it seems that Dante has served as a focal point for Heaney's further negotiations with the example of Eliot. In his essay from 1985, 'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', Heaney examined the ways in which Dante has been assessed in the twentieth century by Eliot and the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam respectively. His first lengthy discussion of Eliot, the essay was later developed into 'The Government of the Tongue', the key address in his 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures.[91] In both 'Envies and Identifications' and 'The Government of the Tongue', Heaney expresses his admiration for the fresh approach Mandelstam had taken to Dante in his essay from 1933, 'Conversation about Dante'.[92] In particular, Heaney is struck by his assertion that *The Divine Comedy* is not "under the strict control of a

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90 T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 191. (Subsequent quotations from Eliot's poetry are from this edition.)

91 Seamus Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review*, 15, Spring 1985 (Hereafter cited as 'Envies and Identifications'); and 'The Government of the Tongue', *The Government of the Tongue*.

92 Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', *Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris (London: Collins Harvill, 1991).

universe of rules, from the rules of metre to the commandments of the church" (*The Government of the Tongue*, p. 94). Instead, Mandelstam recanonises Dante as "the sponsor of impulse and instinct" (p. 95).

Considering Eliot in this context, Heaney sees the author of *The Waste Land* as an equivalent to Mandelstam's Dante, "every bit as faithful to the process of dream and as susceptible to gifts of the unconscious as Coleridge was before he received the person from Porlock" (p. 92). In contrast, the older Eliot of *Four Quartets* was a poet who, following his convertion to the Anglican Church, had adopted Dante as an exemplar whose art served a governing system of religious belief. Commenting on 'Little Gidding', Heaney says: "There is a stern and didactic profile to the Dante whom Eliot conjures up" (p. 98). In this way, centering on Mandelstam's and Eliot's readings of Dante, Heaney has created for himself two poetic models: one representing absolute lyric autonomy, while the other springs out of orthodoxy. And examining the dialectic between these two models has been crucial to his own role as a Northern Irish poet writing within an English lyric tradition.

Here, though, a distinction must be made between Heaney's cultural pieties as a regional writer, and Eliot's orthodoxies in *Four Quartets*. In 'Envies and Identifications' Heaney voices his reservations about the later Eliot, commenting on the poetic voice in 'Little Gidding': "[Eliot's] dream of perfection is...served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority, of a purity beyond language and tribe, an imperial lexicon" (p. 9). This dream of perfection and linguistic purity is closely linked with the poet's reading of Dante, as it was expressed in an essay from 1929.[93] Dismissing the vernacular qualities in *The Divine Comedy*, he here argues that Dante's Tuscan dialect was very near in feeling to a classical and ecclesiastical Latin. To Eliot, Dante's poetry offered a European heritage that "cuts across the modern division of nationality" (p. 207). In 'Envies and Identifications', Heaney takes issue with such a reading: "What I loved first in the *Commedia* was the local intensity...[t]he way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history."[94] Clearly, for a Northern Irish poet whose voice is firmly rooted in the local

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[93] T. S. Eliot, 'Dante', *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975). See also his later essay, 'What Dante Means to Me' (1950), in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965).

[94] Seamus Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications', p. 18. In this way Heaney agrees with Les Murray, who speaks in his essay 'On Sitting Back and Thinking About Porter's Boeotia' of "Dante's deeply Boeotian purpose of creating a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters" (*The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p. 60).

experience, Eliot's obedience to a "purified" language beyond tribe and nation is culturally challenging. To follow his example blindly would be to concede to the marginalisation of one's vernacular heritage, to side with the mandarin at the expense of the peasant. Consequently, Heaney criticises Eliot's championing of a "Roman vocabulary which is socially and historically patrician" (p. 9), implying that it is as hierarchic and concentric as notions of a standardised English tradition. But at the same time, as a poetic construct Heaney is also ready to see Eliot's "pure" language as a valid alternative, as a mode of speech which may enable to poet to transcend the "here and now" of the historical situation:

> It is a constant part of our desires, this hankering for an absolute and purely delineated world of wisdom and beauty, and it sometimes asks literature to climb the stair of transcendence and give us images free from the rag–and–bone–shop reek of time and place. Such a dream of perfection is best served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority... Eliot's achievement in his Dantean stanzas is to create just such an illusion of oracular authority by the hypnotic deployment of perfected latinate words (ibid.).

Station Island, Heaney's collection from 1982, also explores these tensions between artistic freedom and cultural piety. Set on Station Island in Lough Derg and openly drawing on Dante, the title sequence stages a descent into the poet's own Purgatory, an Irish–Catholic dreamscape inhabited by ghosts he must confront. In 'Envies and Identifications' Heaney notes that "the choice of Lough Derg as a locus for the poem did, in fact, represent a solidarity with orthodox ways and obedient attitudes, and that very solidarity and obedience were what had to be challenged" (p. 19). And so, in the concluding passage of 'Station Island' the poet is instructed by the ghost of Joyce, "in an encounter reminiscent of 'Little Gidding' but with the advice that Mandelstam might have given" (ibid.). The ghost says: "Your obligation/ is not discharged by any common rite./ What you must do must be done on your own" (p. 267). And yet, Joyce's presence in the sequence is counter–balanced by the voices of other ghosts. In section XI, for instance, "a monk's face/ that had spoken years ago from behind a grille/ spoke again" (p. 264). Echoing Eliot's "You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid" from 'Little Gidding', his message to the poet is to "[r]ead poems as prayers" (p. 265). Moreover, it would be simplistic to see Joyce's advice merely as a Mandelstamian warning against any Eliotic propensities.

In an interview from 1989, Heaney commended both Dante and Joyce for the way in which they had dodged an imperial tradition and achieved a "cosmic amplification of the

local".[95] However, in 'Station Island' the Joycean example not only implies autonomy from an imperial tradition, but just as much a cutting loose from one's local pieties. In other words, Joyce's ghost speaks of the freedom to draw on the full range of your literary heritage, the freedom to embrace and negotiate between various modes of expression, including Eliot's "purified", sibylline language of 'Little Gidding'.

This ability to grant the poetic voice its autonomy has become increasingly central in Heaney's later works. And most importantly, perhaps, it has enabled him to return to the configuration of elements that shaped his literary sensibility in the early years, and to negotiate more confidently between his own regionality and the English literary canon to which he was exposed from the beginning of his career. In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney speaks of poetry as "an answer...being given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it" ('Frontiers of Writing', p. 191), elaborating: "[W]ithin our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge...each form of knowledge redresses the other and the frontier between them is there for the crossing" (p. 203). Written during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Heaney seems to pose almost demonstratively in these lectures as the regional poet and scholar who has occupied the old bastion of "Eng. Lit.". Turning to an English mainstream tradition, he continuously juxtaposes it with works of more marginalised English–language writers: names like Marlowe, George Herbert and John Donne are being discussed alongside Joyce, MacDiarmid and John Hewitt.

In this way, Heaney also ventures a reassessment of his early encounter with an Anglocentric canon. In 'Extending the Alphabet', for instance, he recalls how, in his first year as a university student, he heard Professor Terence Spencer read from Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*: "even though I have learned to place this poetry's expansionist drive in the context of nascent English imperialism, I am still grateful for the enlargements it offered" (*The Redress of Poetry*, pp. 21–2). Addressing the same uncertainty he described in *Among Schoolchildren* about betraying the culture of the parish, Heaney seems now to have become more inclined to acknowledge his first encounter with the English literary canon as "a fundamentally pleasurable experience that need not be reneged on for the sake of any subsequent political correctness" (ibid.). In 'Further Language', Heaney speaks along the same lines:

> We may have had the experience of being marginal but we had not been initiated into its meaning. We still took it for granted that the canon was probably good for us and

[95] This interview was published in Italian, but is quoted in Carla de Petris, 'Heaney and Dante', *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garratt (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1995), p. 161.

> got dug in, or at least resigned ourselves to dodging through. We certainly had not learnt to consider ourselves ill done by because we were being offered hallowed names of English literature for study (p. 8).

Wishing in his Oxford Lectures to escape the confinements of such politically approved, late–twentieth–century terms as "post–colonial", Heaney also eliminates the distance between George Herbert's Englishness and his own Irishness, saying: "even the most imposed–upon colonial will discern in the clear element of Herbert a true paradigm of the shape of things" (*The Redress of Poetry*, pp. 9–10).

It is with the same open–mindedness that Heaney turns to the full breadth of his dual heritage in his most recent collections of poetry, *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level.* On one level, both volumes mark a return to the Derry–based childhood experience that provided the material for his early works.[96] But at the same time, there is a strong sense of loosened gravity in his poetic voice and vision, an ability to negotiate freely between his vernacular heritage and an elevated English literary tradition. As Bernard O'Donoghue has pointed out, *Seeing Things* is on the linguistic level marked by an extensive range of Ulster dialect usages, as well as English high–style archaisms (*O'Donoghue*, pp. 128–30). I have already discussed how the word *thole* in 'The Sounds of Rain' echoes Heaney's regional background, as well as a wider English–language heritage springing from *Beowulf.* Similarly, in 'Crossings, xxxii' the poet acts as a mediator between a localised and a standardised English:

> A kesh could mean the track some called a *causey*
> Raised above the wetness of the bog,
> Or the causey where it bridged old drains and streams.
>
> It steadies me to tell these things.
> (*Seeing Things*, p. 90.)

Also, Milton's mower, whom Heaney had borrowed in his first student poem and later abandoned in favour of farm labourers that were "gaunt as Celtic crosses", finds his way back in *Seeing Things*, now speaking with a Derry accent: "'Go and tell your father...//I have mowed it clean as a new sixpence'" ('Man and Boy', ibid., p. 14). And later, in *The Spirit Level*, the rural landscape of Heaney's childhood experience is synthesized with the settings of a classic pastoral tradition:

> Where scythes once hung all night in alder trees

[96] In this way, as O'Donoghue also points out (p. 124), the first section of 'A Restrospect' from *Seeing Things* is in fact identical with 'Mayday', an earlier uncollected poem which appeared on 14 October 1966 in the *New Statesman* (p. 556).

> And mowers played dawn scherzos on the blades,
> Their arms like harpists' arms, one drawing towards,
> One sweeping the bright rim of the extreme.[97]

In *Seeing Things*, Heaney also allows himself to negotiate further with the example of Eliot. From the outset of the book, Eliot's presence as a successor to Dante and Virgil is drawn up via Heaney's translation of a passage from the *Aeneid*. The title of the piece, 'The Golden Bough', deliberately echoes Sir James Frazer's anthropological study which encouraged Eliot to incorporate classic mythology into a twentieth–century universe. And when the Cumean Sibyl advises Aeneas in Heaney's poem, "If you will go beyond the limit,/ Understand what you must do beforehand" (*Seeing Things*, p. 3), it reads as a reiteration of Eliot's message to balance the individual talent with an informed sense of tradition. Indeed, the oracular tone is in itself reminiscent of *Four Quartets*, and prepares us for the book's *Squarings* sequence, in which Heaney extends the register of his voice to allow a latinate "pure" language: "'Down with form *triumphant*, long live.../ Form *mendicant* and *convalescent*...'" (ibid., p. 98); "Air and ocean known as *antecedents*/ Of each other. In *apposition* with/ *Omnipresence*, *equilibrium*, brim" (p. 80 — emphases added). But while Heaney opens up to the latinate language of 'Little Gidding' in these lines, he is never far away from the homely, down–to–earth idiom, as that verbal progression from "equilibrium" to "brim" also suggests.

Constantly keeping his medium flexible, so as to negotiate between different levels of experience, Heaney counters Eliot's notion of poetry as serving a governing system of thought or belief. This becomes clearer if we also compare the different ways in which late Eliot and present–day Heaney make use of George Herbert. As Ronald Schuchard has illustrated in a recent essay, 'Little Gidding' was to a great extent informed by Eliot's rediscovery in the 1930s of Herbert's poetry and, to Eliot, Herbert's merits lay in the inextricability of his art and religious vocation.[98] Heaney, however, defines his level of commonality with both exemplars in purely artistic terms. Speaking in *The Redress of Poetry* about poetry's "counterveiling gestures...tilting the scales of reality toward some transcendent equilibrium" (p. 3), he reinterprets Herbert's 'The Pulley', not treating it as a religious poem, but rather as an allegory of the dynamics of poetry. In comparing it with his own Clonmacnoise poem from the *Squarings* sequence in *Seeing Things*, and

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[97] Seamus Heaney, 'The Sharping Stone', *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 61.

[98] Ronald Schuchard, "'If I think, again, of this place': Eliot, Herbert and the Way to 'Little Gidding'", in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's* Four Quartets, ed. Edward Lobb (London: the Athlone Press, 1993).

eschewing their differences in cultural temperament, he says: "Both poems are about the way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them" (p. xiii). In fact, in *Seeing Things* as a whole Heaney's poetic and linguistic mediation between different dimensions of reality is captured in several images that correspond with Herbert's pulley. In 'Wheels Within Wheels', for instance, Heaney recalls how as a child, he would turn a bike upside down and work the pedals with his hands:

> Something about the way those pedal treads
> Worked very palpably at first against you
> And then began to sweep your hand ahead
> Into a new momentum — that all entered me
> Like an access of free power.
> (*Seeing Things*, p. 46.)

A similar instance occurs in 'A Basket of Chestnuts' (p. 24), and later, in 'The Swing' from *The Spirit Level*, this correspondence with Herbert's pulley–image is perhaps too consciously exploited, when a swing is described as "hanging like pulley–slack,/ A lure let down to tempt the soul to rise" (*The Spirit Level*, p. 48).

This idea of poetry as a voice that crosses boundaries is central to both *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*. Not only does it allow Heaney to articulate an artistic level of commonality with people like Eliot and George Herbert. It is just as significant that when alluding to poets whom he commended for their regionality earlier in his career, he now focuses more on the liminal qualities of their voices, on the way they have also defied the gravities of the parochial to create a universal art. In his Nobel speech, Heaney recalls how he first came to love Robert Frost "for his farmer's accuracy and his wily down–to–earthness" (*Crediting Poetry*, p. 12). But in *Seeing Things* the poet declares: "Blessed be down–to–earth! Blessed be highs!" (p. 14). And the 'crediting of marvels'[99] which marks both *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level* reveals a different kind of influence coming from Frost. 'A Basket of Chestnuts' clearly echoes a poem like 'Birches', with its gravity–defying release of the imagination:

> There's a shadow–boost, a giddy strange assistance
> That happens when you swing a loaded basket.
> The lightness of the thing seems to diminish
> The actual weight of what's being hoisted in it.

Such lines also seem to reflect an ambition to emulate what Heaney recently hailed as the

[99] Seamus Heaney, 'Fosterling', *Seeing Things*, p. 50.

"volatile gift" and "metaphorical gleefulness" of Norman MacCaig's poetry.[100] Similarly, in *The Redress of Poetry* he turns to Thomas Hardy, another early exemplar who helped to affirm his poetic trust in his own regional experience. But at the present stage, Heaney is not merely concerned with Hardy as a poet with a firmly rooted rural background. Instead, examining his poem 'Afterwards', he focuses on the way it seesaws between the realms of the ordinary and the extraordinary: "In one way, [it] is an expression of solidarity with the ordinary world... But in the end, the poem is more given over to the extraordinary...more dedicated to the world–renewing potential of the imagined response than to the adequacy of the social one" (p. xvii).

Another poet whose regionality is being reassessed along these lines is Hugh MacDiarmid. In both *The Redress of Poetry* and *The Spirit Level*, Heaney re–addresses his own problematic relationship with MacDiarmid's works, as he had first voiced it in a review from 1972 called 'Tradition and an Individual Talent'. In this early piece, he had praised MacDiarmid's lyrical works written in a Synthetic Scots for their appeal to the auditory imagination, speaking along these lines: "The man who writes ["Water Music"] is manifestly literate but opts for a local geography and idiom that aspires to subdue rather than include the world in its little room" (*Preoccupations*, p. 197). But also commenting on MacDiarmid's later abandonment of a localised cultural voice in favour of a more universal, synthesized English, he pointed out: "In attempting a poetry of ideas MacDiarmid can write like a lunatic lexicographer... When his brow furrows with earnest ambition...we witness the amazing metamorphosis of genius into bore" (ibid.). Although in *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney still emphasises the artistic failure of MacDiarmid's later works, he is now also able to sympathise with his endeavours, patiently explaining his motives: "He had to find an idiom that would not make fetish of the local but would rather transpose the parochial into the planetary. He therefore strove for an all–inclusive mode of utterance" ('The Torchlight Procession of One', p. 121). Consequently, in 'An Invocation' from *The Spirit Level*, Heaney also requests: "Incline to me, MacDiarmid, out of Shetland,/ .../ Incline as the sage of the winds that flout the rock face,/ .../ I underprized your far–out, blathering genius" (p. 27).

In his later works, Heaney seems intent on challenging the perceived distinctions between centralised and marginalised types of poetry. However, far from wishing to reject a received canonical tradition, he has instead sought to draw up the contours of a lyrical heritage that is culturally broader and more heterogeneous than what the

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100 Seamus Heaney, 'A Poet Remembered', *The Scotsman*, 27 January 1995, p. 16

standardised curriculum of English Literature has previously allowed. Such concerns are also apparent in the recent poetry anthology which he has edited in collaboration with Ted Hughes, aptly titled *The School Bag*. In the foreword Heaney notes that "[w]e wanted this anthology to be...like a checklist...a schoolbook in the usual sense...a compendium of examples".[101] Thus, as one reviewer argued, *The School Bag* "is an altogether sterner affair" than its precursor, *The Rattle Bag*, in which Heaney and Hughes "could afford to cock a snook at the canon by leaving out Herbert and Spencer, yet finding room for 'Frankie and Johnny'".[102] Instead, being much more canonical *The School Bag* is intended by Heaney and Hughes as "a homage to poets to whom we ourselves had 'gone to school' in one way or another from the beginning" ('Foreword', p. xvii). Consequently, the book also includes several piece which had appeared in Heaney's own schoolbook anthologies from the 1940s and 1950s.[103] Even echoing E.W. Parker's introduction to *A Pageant of English Verse*, in which he spoke of 'representing our greatest poets strongly', Heaney says of the selection in *The School Bag*: "Time and again we were forced to decide whether personal affection for something not particularly 'major' could be allowed to outweigh the historical and canonical claims of a more obvious selection" ('Foreword'). But while paying attention to such "canonical claims", the editors of this book also wish to move our perceived boundaries of a monumental poetic tradition by including poems translated from the Irish, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic languages: "It is only in the relatively recent past that there has been any developed awareness of the deep value and high potential of the non–English poetries of Britain and Ireland" (ibid.). In this way, *The School Bag* creates a "high–cultural context" that enables Heaney to include — and thereby to redress — such marginalised texts as MacGiolla Ghunna's 'The Yellow Bittern'.

If *The School Bag* draws up the contours of a shared, heterogeneous tradition of English–language poetry, this affirms Heaney's artistic sense of belonging in the face of his identity as a Northern Irish Catholic. Questions of nationality have always been a controversial issue in his work, as seen in his public response to his inclusion in Blake Morrison's and Andrew Motion's 1982 anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary*

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101 Seamus Heaney, 'Foreword', *The School Bag* (op. cit.), p. xvii.

102 Blake Morrison, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', review of *The School Bag*, *TLS*, 11 April 1997, p. 23. Seamus Heaney & Ted Hughes, *The Rattle Bag* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982).

103 *The School Bag* includes seven pieces from *A Pageant of English Verse* (the anonymous 'Somer is i–comen in', 'Tom o' Bedlam's Song', 'Thomas Rymer', 'Adam lay ibounden', 'A Lyke–Wake Dirge', 'The Twa Corbies', and Eliot's 'The Hollow Men'), and one from *The Ambleside Book of Verse* ('The Bonnie Earl of Moray').

British Poetry.[104] In a verse–pamphlet published by the Field Day Company, entitled *An Open Letter*, the poet objected to being recruited under the banner of "British", reminding the editors that "My passport's green".[105] However, if this could be interpreted as a rare instance of republican flag–waving in Heaney's poetry, his objective was also to highlight the troubled complexities of a Northern Ireland identity. As a Catholic, *his* native Ulster has its cultural base in the republic, providing a spiritual hinterland that differs from that of a Protestant writer from the same region:

> Ulster is part of Paddyland,
> And Londonderry
> Is far away as New England
> Or County Kerry.
> (Ibid., p. 28.)

Painfully aware of the need to acknowledge cultural diversity, Heaney also made it clear in *An Open Letter* that he could not — and would not — speak on behalf of the other poets from Northern Ireland included in the Penguin anthology: "I'll stick to *I*. Forget the we."[106] But in doing so, he simultaneously pointed to his own need for artistic autonomy in a national cultural context. As James Fenton has pointed out, Heaney's objection in *An Open Letter* to having his works labelled and appropriated as "British" should also be seen in relation to his refusal to speak as poet for the Irish republican cause, as it was expressed in 'The Flight Path' from *The Spirit Level*. 'The Flight Path' recalls an encounter during the Troubles with a staunch Republican:

> 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write
> Something for us?' 'If I do write something,
> Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.'[107]

Thus, speaking as a poet whose "passport's green", but who will not be tied down by national pieties, or hijacked by a nomenclature that is ripe with older attitudes of Anglocentrism, Heaney did not take exception to being anthologised alongside the other

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104 Blake Morrison & Andrew Motion, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

105 Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter* (Belfast: Field Day Pamphlets, 1983); reprinted in The Field Day Company, *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1985), p. 25.

106 Ibid. , p. 25. Out of the sixteen poets included in Morrison's and Motion's anthology, six were from Northern Ireland (of Catholic as well as Protestant backgrounds). In addition to Heaney, these were Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian.

107 Seamus Heaney, 'The Flight Path', *The Spirit Level*, p. 25. See James Fenton, 'The Orpheus of Ulster', *New York Review of Books*, 11 July 1996, p. 37.

poets included in Morrison's and Motion's book.[108] His quarrel was with the title itself. Indeed, as we learn in *An Open Letter*, the title originally intended for *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* had been *Opened Ground*, which would have underlined rather than subdued the cultural diversity of the works presented. Ironically, the phrase derives from Heaney's own work, and it was recently used as the title of his 1998 selection *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*, which is the nearest we have to a *Collected Poems*, spanning his development from *Death of a Naturalist* to the mature voice of *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*. However, if "Opened Ground" had been picked in this context to emphasise the variety of interests and allegiances which Heaney has explored over the years, its specific chronology in his *oeuvre* is also suggestive of the poet's gradual, pained struggle towards his artistic autonomy as a "Peasant Mandarin". In *North* — a collection deeply marked by the violence of the Troubles, and published after his flight to the Republic — Heaney deployed the phrase for the first time to describe the "rending process in the colony":

> No treaty
>
> I foresee will salve completely your tracked
> And stretchmarked body, the big pain
> That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.
> ('Act of Union', *Opened Ground*, pp. 127–8.)

But later, in 'Glanmore Sonnets' from *Field Work* (1979), the phrase took on a more positive, artistically productive meaning. Transplanted to the soil of Wicklow, Heaney was looking assuredly for a poetic voice "That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:/ Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground" ('Glanmore Sonnets, II', ibid., p. 164). In retrospect, this passage points towards the later developments of Heaney's art. Indeed, the poet seems to have come full circle in his mature works. After going through a crucial phase of exploring his vernacular roots and manifesting his Northern Irishness in the early 1970s, he has gradually allowed himself to come back to the full range of his early influences, and negotiated more confidently between his own regionality and the English literary canon to which he was exposed in the early stages of his education. Heaney has flowered as a "Peasant Mandarin".

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[108] In fact, although Heaney wished only to speak for himself in *An Open Letter*, he invariably also voiced the concerns of some of the other poets represented, such as Douglas Dunn, who is discussed by the editors not even as a British, but as an English poet.

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Derek Walcott: Purifying the Language of the Tribe

As a "Peasant Mandarin", Heaney has on several occasions expressed his sense of allegiance with the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. In his review article 'The Murmur of Malvern' (originally published in 1979 as 'The Language of Exile'), he noted for instance: "[Walcott] has done for the Caribbean what Synge did for Ireland, found a language woven out of dialect and literature, neither folksy nor condescending, a singular idiom evolved out of one man's inherited divisions and obsessions."[1] In this way, Heaney's own need to balance his local or national cultural pieties with a wider sense of artistic autonomy also echoes the concerns voiced by Walcott in 'A Far Cry from Africa':

> I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
> Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
> Betray them both, or give back what they give?[2]

'A Far Cry from Africa' was written in 1957, at a time when the debate about a post–colonial national culture flourished in the Caribbean. Generally, this debate was influenced by a growing awareness of *négritude*, as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Leopold Senghor had coined the term two decades earlier. Walcott's poem addresses the notion of having to choose as a Caribbean between a European colonial heritage and a distant, pre–colonial African cultural background. Behind his rather uneasy questioning is his love of the English language, and of a European literary tradition from which he draws sustenance as a Caribbean writer wishing to forge the consciousness of his race. Twenty years later, Walcott voiced these concerns again in his long poem 'The Schooner *Flight*'. But this time hailing his own mixed ancestry, the poet was able to affirm his right as an ex–colonial to make use of a European cultural heritage. In the voice of Shabine, he said: "I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,/ I had a sound colonial education,/ I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/ and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (*Collected Poems*, p. 346).

Given his mixed cultural background, there is a danger in reading Walcott from a

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1 Seamus Heaney, 'The Murmur of Malvern', *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 23.

2 Derek Walcott, 'A Far Cry from Africa', *Collected Poems: 1948—1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 18. (Unless otherwise stated, subsequent quotations from Walcott's verse are from this work.)

taken–for–granted paradigm of post–colonial theory. In order to assess properly the ways in which he relates to an English and Eurocentric poetic tradition, we need to attend first of all to the particularities of his West Indian identity and literary upbringing. This chapter investigates Walcott's early response to the literature that was transmitted through "a sound colonial education". To understand his development from being an apprentice to being a poet with a distinct Caribbean voice, his works will be examined in the light of the emerging intellectual climate in the West Indies. In this connection, exploring Walcott's notion of a creolised voice, attention will be paid to the musical and formal orientation of his verse. As will become clear, far from discarding a standardised English orthography, the poet makes a case for seeing a received literary language as being flexible and open to various inflections of speech. Indeed, seeing a close link between his own vernacular heritage and the rhetorical flourish of an Elizabethan word–culture, he has strongly defended writing in an elevated language which could otherwise be mistaken as a symptom of some sort of colonial hangover. The language on the page, according to Walcott, serves poetry as a construct, and may help to enrich a living vernacular culture while linking it to a wider heritage.

From a post–colonial perspective, Walcott may seem a strikingly conservative writer. Informing his art is a strong sense of a classical tradition, partly mediated by Eliot, who reintroduced Homer, Virgil and Dante as literary exemplars in the twentieth century. But also in this respect it is crucial to acknowledge the wider cultural context in which Walcott places himself as an English–language poet. Drawing on a Homeric tradition has not only accommodated Walcott's apparently Adamic position as a writer who celebrates a largely unsung cultural experience. It also serves to address a late–twentieth–century metropolitan culture which he finds has lost its faith in the restorative and cathartic powers of poetry. Furthermore, by reviving the heritage of a suspended Empire — the Greco–Roman — the poet reminds us of the colonial past of a British imperial culture, and so legitimises his own strategy as a Caribbean "Peasant Mandarin" who has appropriated a Western literary tradition.

Describing the local language culture of his native island St. Lucia, Walcott says:

> I grew up in two languages, Creole and English. And, of course, tonal English with a Creolized inflection. So there were actually three languages or even four. There was French, which was not spoken too much on the island, French Creole, English and then French Accent... I could have quite comfortably and justifiably written in French if I had learned French properly or practiced it sufficiently. Because in a way St. Lucia is not different from Martinique. It is only different because of a political treaty between

France and England.[3]

Historically, Creole (or Patois) had evolved in the Caribbean as an exclusive language among the slaves, carrying strong African elements and generally being unintelligible to the white European plantation owners. It formed the basic medium for the Calypso, which has become so central to the development of a West Indian oratorical folk tradition. As Louis James points out in *The Islands in Between*:

> African origins for [the calypso] are suggested by a possible source of the name, 'Kaiso', an African word meaning 'bravo' which is still heard in the calypso tents. Calypsonians have claimed to have heard old calypsoes entirely in African languages. More probably they were in the private *patois* the slaves used to satirize their masters without their oppressors knowing.[4]

Today, however, the Creole language has "shaded off into an infinite scale of levels of dialect", although "this has not destroyed the underlying patterns of dialect. It is the language of the nursery even for the upper–class West Indians, and it remains the only key to intense areas of their experience" (ibid., p. 18).

While at an early stage, Walcott was intrigued by the idea of writing in Creole he also stresses that "I was growing up in a tradition of English" (White, p. 152). The son of a civil servant and a teacher, he belonged to what Edward Baugh has called "the brown bourgeoisie".[5] While his grandmothers on both sides were of African descent, his paternal grandfather was English and his maternal grandfather Dutch. Furthermore, his family belonged to a Protestant minority, whereas most St. Lucians were Roman Catholics. In his interview with J. P. White, Walcott makes a connection between his early sense of an English word–culture and his religious upbringing, because in the Methodist church the sermons and hymns were in English rather than Latin, and because "the word [was] more important than the ritual" (p. 152).

As in the majority of the British colonies, the education system in St. Lucia was based on the curriculum of the English public school system, with compulsory French and Latin. Students sat Cambridge exams and were prepared for the London Matriculation. Speaking to Edward Hirsch in 1977, Walcott notes that as "an English colonial child", he was encouraged to think that "politically and culturally the British

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3 Derek Walcott, interview with J. P. White, *Green Mountains Review*, No. 1, Spring–Summer 1990; reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p.152. (Hereafter cited as *Conversations*; this interview cited as 'White')

4 Louis James (ed.), *The Islands in Between — Essays on West Indian Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 12.

5 Edward Baugh, *Memory as Vision:* Another Life (London: Longman, 1978), p. 9.

heritage was supposed to be mine".[6] History lessons, for instance, were based on James A. Williamson's *The British Empire and Commonwealth: a History for Senior Forms* (1935).[7] In his autobiographical poem *Another Life* (1973), Walcott describes how the children were being taught about their own island:

> "Sah, Castries ees a coaling station and
> der twenty–seventh best harba in der worl'!
> In eet the entire Breetesh Navy can be heeden!"
> "What is the motto of St. Lucia, boy?"
> "*Statio haud malefida carinis*".
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 172.)

While this passage reveals an imperialistic and Anglocentric account of History, it can also be argued that the teaching offered a sense of belonging within a wider cultural context. The adoption of Virgil's *statio haud malefida carinis* ("a safe anchorage for ships" — his description of the port of Naples) as the motto of St. Lucia provided the children with an awareness of a classical European heritage beyond that of the British Empire. Similarly, in 'Leaving School' Walcott notes that "we had been taught that Saint Lucia was "The Helen of The West" because she was fought for so often by the French and British."[8] Given this received cultural awareness, it was therefore not "incongruous to do Latin in a place where you could look outside the window and see bananas" (White, p. 153). In this way, Walcott also hails the colonial education he received as "the greatest bequest the Empire made".[9]

From the beginning, his classical knowledge has informed Walcott's quest for shaping a West Indian poetry. In 'Origins' (1964), he portrays himself in this manner, extending the Homeric emblem applied to his native island by historians:

> Between the Greek and African pantheon,
> Lost animist, I rechristened trees:
> Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove.
> Dorade, their golden mythological dolphin,

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[6] Derek Walcott, interview with Edward Hirsch, *Contemporary Literature*, 20.3, Summer 1979; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 53. (This interview is hereafter cited as 'Hirsch 1979'.)

[7] See Edward Baugh, *Memory as Vision*, p. 11, and Walcott's *Another Life*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 211–3.

[8] Derek Walcott, 'Leaving School', *London Magazine*, 5.6, September 1965, p. 4. Edward Baugh has traced the genesis of this commonly used simile to an historical account made by Sir Frederick Treves in 1910. Baugh quotes these lines from his book *The Cradle of the Deep*: "St. Lucia is the Helen of the West Indies, and has been the cause of more blood–shedding than was ever provoked by Helen of Troy" (*Memory as Vision*, p. 12).

[9] Derek Walcott, 'Meanings', *Savacou*, 2, 1970, p. 51.

> Leapt, flaking light, as once for Arion,
> For the broken archipelago of wave–browned gods.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 12.)

Similarly, in Chapter 3 of *Another Life* Walcott creates a Homeric catalogue of names to portray his island community. Ajax becomes the "lion–coloured stallion from Sealey's stable" (ibid., p. 158), and Helen is embodied as:

> Janie, the town's one clear–complexioned whore,
> with two tow–headed children in her tow,
> she sleeps with sailors only, her black
> hair electrical
> as all that trouble over Troy.
> (Ibid., p. 161.)

The chapter ends: "These dead, these derelicts,/ that alphabet of the emaciated,/ they were the stars of my mythology" (p. 164). Such passages can be seen as instances in which Walcott is working towards his grand Caribbean epic poem, *Omeros*,[10] in which the island life of St. Lucia revolves around the aptly named fishermen Achille, Hector and Philoctete, as well as the local beauty Helen. Commenting on this long poem and its Homeric parallels, he recently said:

> These associations that occur naturally if you have read the Homeric poems...seem to me to register exact parallels, proportionally speaking, between the Caribbean experience and that of Homer's Greece — the scale of the thing. We think of the Trojan War as an epic directed by Spielberg, with two million extras; but when you think of what the actual size of the walls of Troy was, or what size a Greek ship was, or the size of islands like Odysseus's "rock," Ithaca...it turns out to be quite small... To me, the *Odyssey* is not an epic poem in that sense; the *Odyssey* is a very domestic poem.[11]

As in other British colonies, the teaching of literature in the schools of St. Lucia was also true to a traditional English syllabus. As we have seen, looking back on his early encounter with English poetry in school, Heaney has commented on the distance he came to feel between the language on the page and his own indigenous word–culture. Other regional and post–colonial writers have voiced similar experiences. In Les Murray's case, the problems also involved having to relate to a literature that makes references to an alien geography and climate. However, Walcott maintains that in his experience any such difficulties were overshadowed by an early fascination with the literary medium itself. In 'The Muse of History', he says with reference to Wordsworth's snow and daffodils:

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10 Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

11 Derek Walcott, 'Reflections on *Omeros*', in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, ed. Gregson Davis (Durham, NC: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96.2, Spring 1997), p. 230.

> They were real, more real than the heat and the oleander, perhaps, because they lived on the page, in imagination, and therefore in memory. There is a memory of imagination in literature which has nothing to do with actual experience, which is, in fact, another life, and that experience of the imagination will continue to make actual the quest of a medieval knight or the bulk of a white whale, because of the power of a shared imagination.[12]

This is also corroborated by Louis James, who moved to Jamaica in 1961 as a newly appointed lecturer at the University of the West Indies. James recalls being struck by the high level of the students coming to the university. As he recalls:

> They were quite sophisticated in the sense that they had a greater sense of style, when compared to the students I have taught in Britain. They had a great sense of tradition. A lot of the attitudes towards and interests in literature were based on a kind of Victorian concept of literature as a high form, which had gone out in England but was still preserved in the Caribbean. I remember having a very stern debate with my students in Jamaica. I'd just read the Aldous Huxley article on Wordsworth, which says that you cannot really read Wordsworth in the Tropics, and I remember saying "of course you cannot read him in the tropics, because it is based on this benign European idea of nature". And they were furious, they said "of course we can understand it", and they really did. I mean, they were interested, and the secondary schooling was very good and probably way above the average teaching over here. At the same time, because being played off against the other major languages, their sensibility was sharpened in a sense.[13]

However, as he also points out, there were very few people who actually got so far as to tertiary education in the Caribbean, so those who actually made it were among the most gifted students.

In Walcott's own words, rather than estranging him, the encounter with a European literary tradition during his primary and secondary education provided him with what he has described as "a double kind of excitement": "the one that existed in the classroom in English poetry and French verses, and the one outside the window. A whole life waited outside to be described" (White, p. 153). Referring to the cultural "backwardness" of St. Lucia, Walcott furthermore notes that the range of books available was limited, but consequently also of a high standard. Cheap paperbacks were rare, and the choice was "either the classics or comic books".[14] Talking to Edward Hirsch, he argues how the aspiring writer in fact benefits from growing up in a society that is "anthology–influenced", revealing a highly canonical view of poetic tradition:

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12 Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 62.

13 Personal interview with Louis James, conducted in Canterbury on 7 October 1997. (Subsequent quotations are also from this interview.)

14 Derek Walcott, interview with Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson, *The Cream City Review*, 14.2, Winter 1990; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 175. (Hereafter cited as 'Brown and Johnson'.)

> that's good, because what influences him are selections, essences that have been chosen by editors or anthologists, so that what he sees is not a bewildering volume of minor writers but the selection of masterpieces, or even excerpts of masterpieces. I think it would be the same if someone on a desert island had a copy of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (Hirsch 1979, p. 52).

However, he has also pointed out that such an influence works differently in a small 'backwater' society like St. Lucia, than in a metropolitan, 'mandarin' university culture where a sense of tradition becomes hierarchic because works are being read historically and chronologically. In Walcott's experience, the range of influences was simultaneous, free of this kind of hierarchic approach (Brown & Johnson, p. 176).

Looking at Walcott's early exposure to literature, the almost total lack of West Indian writing is significant. The first Caribbean poet to whom he was introduced was the Jamaican George Campbell. *Another Life* recalls Walcott's mentor and painter friend, Harold Simmons, reading aloud from Campbell's *First Poems*:

> And from a new book,
> bound in sea–green linen, whose lines
> matched the exhilaration which their reader,
> rowing the air around him now, conveyed,
> another life it seemed would start again.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 149.)

First Poems had been published in Jamaica in 1945, and became widely acclaimed as a landmark in West Indian poetry, as it broke with the Victorian conventions so prevalent in the existing body of writing. However, Walcott has noted that his first elation over Campbell's poetry was not "because it had anything particularly new to offer in terms of its structural devices, but just because the man was a poet and he was mentioning things I knew" (Hirsch, 1979, p. 54). Furthermore, a lot of Campbell's verses were written as political propaganda, reflecting his active role in the Jamaican nationalist movement. *First Poems* contains titles like 'Constitution Day Poem', 'Emancipation', and 'On This Day', which is dedicated to the launching of the People's National Party.[15] When the book was re–issued in 1981, it included an introductory poem by Walcott, in which he makes a distinction between Campbell the political agitator and Campbell the poet, saying:

> When his worst rhetoric is washed away
> what remains is Campbell, the love poet,
> his love poems hurt as the best should
> not with particular but with universal pain.
> Even his love of people.[16]

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15 George Campbell, *First Poems* (1945; new edition, New York: Garland Press, 1981).

16 Derek Walcott, 'George Campbell', ibid., p. viii.

Although West Indian writing began to flourish during the 1940s, it was generally slow in reaching a domestic audience. Already in the 1930s a handful of writers had emerged out of the Caribbean. However, the most notable ones, such as C. L. R. James, and Jean Rhys, had left the region by the time they were established. This tendency persisted throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Edgar Mittelhölzer, whose first novel *Corentyne Thunder* was published in London in 1941, moved to England in 1948 to establish himself as a full–time writer. Others, like Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul, soon followed in his trail. These writers were part of a larger exodus of West Indians moving to Britain (and to a lesser extent the United States) after the Second World War, in search of the possibilities offered by the metropolitan centre. For the writers, the desire to leave seems to a great extent to have been dictated by the general absence of publishing facilities in the West Indian archipelago. And this was in turn symptomatic of a general lack of interest in new Caribbean literature. In an essay from 1968, Mervyn Morris addressed this particular problem. Voicing the absentee writers' shared sense of exasperation, he noted that they "have tended, fairly enough, to be angriest with the middle class":

> A shamefully large percentage of our population is either illiterate or only marginally literate. 'One cannot accuse an illiterate man of avoiding books', Lamming observes, 'but one wonders what is to be done with people who regard education as something *to have*, but not *to use*.'[17]

Even among those West Indians who did read it was, according to Mervyn Morris, "fashionable to sneer automatically at what was locally produced" (p. 128). In the same way, Louis James recalls his initial surprise when consulting a Jamaican library in the early 1960s, that while it had all of Wilson Harris's novels, they had never been taken out (Personal Interview). Clearly, while the colonial education system had contributed considerably to an anthology–influenced literary sensibility, the strong awareness of — and pride in — a classical European canon had also nurtured a profound conservatism among West Indian readers. This conservatism was even reflected in the popularity enjoyed by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett. As a scholar with an interest in Caribbean folk–lore and folk–culture, she began in the 1940s to write verses in dialect, typically in loose ballad forms. According to Louis James:

> all the children in school loved Louise Bennett and used to recite her in the 1940s and 1950s, but no one could accept it as literature, even when I was there in the 1960s.

[17] Mervyn Morris, 'Some West Indian Problems of Audience', *English*, XVI.94, Spring 1967, p. 127.

> There was just this very strange glass wall between what [the West Indians] enjoyed as being entertainment and what they accepted as literature. The society was so polarised, and people had almost two identities (Personal Interview).

Compared to the widespread scepticism at home, the British publishing industry and reading public showed a growing interest in Caribbean writing. In 1952, the *Times Literary Supplement* carried an article called 'West Indian Writers', signed "From a Correspondent" but attributed by Robert Hamner to Derek Walcott, who was twenty–two at the time of its publication.[18] Drawing attention to the recent publication in Britain of Mittelhölzer's *Shadows Move Among Them* and Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*, the author notes: "[Mittelhölzer and Selvon] are the first of a new generation of West Indian writers, which may bring to English literature fresh and vital qualities. Perhaps in 10, certainly in 20 years from now, West Indian and African literature in the English language should be an accepted part of our Commonwealth cultural scene" (ibid.). Generally, the article's phrasing is suggestive of someone wishing as a Caribbean to be part of the establishment:

> The West Indian writer comes to England as naturally as a century ago (or for that matter even today) the provincial English writer came to London. London is the publishing centre for the novelist from Kingston, Jamaica, as surely as for the novelist from Kingston–on–Thames. A vast expanse of ocean separates the West Indian from his market.

However, while acknowledging the stimulus provided by the old centre, Walcott also points out that West Indian writers going abroad "stand in danger of becoming expatriates...divorced from [their native] experience".

The potential dangers of exile have been a central issue in the critical assessment of some of these novelists.[19] Walcott has suggested that the tastes of a British audience and publishing industry may have been responsible for the fact that prose became the most prominent medium among the first generation of West Indian writers. As he points out in an interview from 1966, "Lamming, Hearne, Wilson Harris, Mittelhölzer, Jan Carew, all used to write poetry", speculating further: "Probably they became novelists because most publishers still want poets to write prose or prose books. Or maybe a kind of adolescence was over for them once they went to England. Or perhaps it was first the necessity of

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18 'West Indian Writers', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 May 1952, p. 348. See Robert D. Hamner, 'Derek Walcott: His Works and His Critics — An Annotated Bibliography, 1947–1980', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XVI.1, August 1981, p. 158.

19 See for instance Michael Gilkes, 'Edgar Mittelhölzer', chapter 11 in *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (1979; 2nd rev. edition, London: Macmillan, 1995).

making a living that made them novelists."[20] In this way, Walcott maintains that despite the growing body of prose fiction, "West Indian Literature had its beginning in poetry" (ibid.). But in making such an assumption, he clearly also wishes to draw attention to the emergence of a local literary culture in the 1940s, paying tribute to the growing number of individuals who stayed in the Caribbean and began to dabble in verses. Without a wider reading public or access to publishing facilities, a lot of these versifiers emerged as part of local clubs of self–educating people who met privately to entertain each other.[21]

Typically, the literature emerging as a result of these cultural clubs in the 1930s and 1940s was in the form of pamphlets or occasional books of verse, produced and distributed by the authors themselves. Gradually, however, a small number of reviews also began to appear, which was to have a crucial effect on the intellectual climate. Probably the most important literary outlet for decades was the Barbadian journal *Bim*, launched in 1942 as the organ of the Young Men's Progressive Club. As the magazine's editor Frank Collymore notes in an editorial from 1951: "*Bim*...came into being during the darker days of the war — a sort of light–hearted attempt to produce some home–grown material in that time of restricted imports".[22] During its first decade of existence, the poetry published in *Bim* reflected this spirit, generally reading as a substitute for "the real thing" and revealing a strong preference for a pre–modernist, Victorian style of writing. In the course of the 1940s, *Bim* contributed considerably to the growth of a local literary climate. While its readership was relatively small it had a circulation beyond Barbados, spanning most of the Caribbean.

In 1942 another enterprise was started, which in the long run proved to be equally important to the literary climate in the West Indies. The BBC World Service in London instigated a weekly programme, *Calling the West Indies*, produced by Una Marsdon, a Jamaican journalist and social worker living in Britain. As Anne Walmsley notes in her study, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972*, the intention with the programme was originally to "enable[ ] West Indian servicemen who were based in London to maintain contact with friends and family back home".[23] But by the end of the war, *Calling*

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20 Derek Walcott, interview with Carl Jacobs, *Trinidad Guardian*, 22 May 1966, p. 9; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 4.

21 Walcott's description in 'Leaving School' of the cultural club which gathered regularly at his parents' house seems to epitomise the general climate: "Their existence...had a defensive, doomed frailty in that steamy, narrow–minded climate... Their efforts...must have been secretely victimized" (p. 7).

22 Frank A. Collymore, 'Note Book', *Bim*, IV.15, December 1951, p. 149.

23 Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972: A Literary & Cultural History* (London & Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1992), p. 6.

the West Indies metamorphosed into an almost exclusively literary magazine, and changed its name to *Caribbean Voices*. Marsdon returned to Jamaica in 1946, and Henry Swanzy — an Irishman working on the BBC — took over as producer of the programme. Running until 1958, *Caribbean Voices* provided an outlet for unsolicited manuscripts submitted by its Caribbean listeners. Among the poets featured on the programme was Frank Collymore, with verses like these:

> We the unknown, the abortive poets,
> Scribbling this and that, knowing
> Full well the futility of all our efforts,
> (...)
> But also knowing full well we must,
> Must strive to pour
> Out the heart's libation in thankfulness
> Though the wine be weak or sour.[24]

In addition to the derivative quality, most of the submitted works are marked by a self–effacing posture, as in Calvin Lambert's:

> Awake! O brothers of the Western Isles!
> Let us awake, and give the world our share
> Of literature to mould the destiny
> Of this tempestuous age in which we live.[25]

Symptomatic of the poems broadcast on *Caribbean Voices*, Lambert's voice falters after the thundering declamation of his opening stanza, reducing "our share/ Of literature" to "One little sonnet from the Western Isles/ With lyric tone; a verse of unrhymed words". Generally there is a tendency among these writers to castigate their own attempts, dismissing them as feeble pastiches. Similarly, in 1951 Frank Collymore told his readers of *Bim*: "We have no desire to boast of a West Indian literature", elaborating:

> a literature, the product of a tradition, is not to be brought into being by blueprints. A literature needs the right climate of ideas: it would be folly to state that such a climate is our heritage; we are lucky if we can discern the first flush of the dawn.[26]

Still, the success of the *Caribbean Voices* programme during the 1940s constituted an important step towards the foundation of such a climate. Not only did it provide an important forum for all West Indians with an interest in writing, collapsing the dividing

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24 Frank Collymore, untitled, BBC World Service: *Caribbean Voices*, broadcast on 10 September 1945, transcript. (Transcripts are held at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading; hereafter cited as *Caribbean Voices.*)

25 Calvin Lambert, untitled, *Caribbean Voices*, 10 September 1945.

26 Frank Collymore, 'Note Book', *Bim*, IV.15, December 1951, p. 149.

distances within the archipelago. Just as significantly, it also offered an unprecedented financial encouragement, paying complimentary if symbolic fees to its contributors. In 1949, Swanzy stated in an article that the "main value in [the] programme...is to provide...a means of inter–communication with like minds, and, if anything so sordid can be mentioned, money, for it must not be forgotten that the BBC is subsidising West Indian writing to the tune of 1,500 Pounds a year in programme fees alone".[27] Furthermore, the BBC venture was instrumental in helping the London–based Caribbean writer to maintain an important link with home, because while Henry Swanzy was Irish, most of the speakers on the programme were in fact West Indians. Thus, George Lamming, John Figueroa, Gordon Bell, Edgar Mittelhölzer and V.S. Naipaul all worked on and off for *Caribbean Voices* between 1945–58. And to the listeners at home, it was equally important that while the programme bore the approving stamp of London and the BBC, it was dominated by identifiably West Indian voices.

Because of its links with London, the programme also gradually provided a critical stimulus which was lacking in the Caribbean. By 1951, *Caribbean Voices* managed to get people like Roy Fuller and Stephen Spender on the programme. Spender appeared in an interview with Swanzy, after he had attended a reading given by George Lamming in London, and after Lamming had introduced him to the works of other Caribbeans. In the interview, he expressed his fascination with this "new" poetry:

> To me this poetry is like a breath of bright and fresh air from another part of the world, and in that way it strikes me as something quite new. I'm really excited about reading these...poets because they give me such a strong impression of the islands in the part of the world which they're written from.[28]

In terms of the generally derivative quality of the writing he was encouraging, if a bit guardedly polite: "in spite of...influences, there's, it seems to me, a real contribution towards poetry, because surely the important thing is that we should have a world movement in poetry". Since the launch of *Caribbean Voices*, *Bim* and other journals had made an effort to print poems that had been read on the programme, seeking to redress the problem of presenting works through the spoken word only. And the increased amount of criticism provided by *Caribbean Voices* also stimulated the journals to engage more analytically in the writing produced at home.

Along with these developments, the founding in 1948 of the University College of

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[27] Henry Swanzy, 'Caribbean Voices — Prolegomena to a West Indian culture', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 1.2, July–August–September 1949, p. 28.

[28] Stephen Spender, speaking on *Caribbean Voices*, 5 August 1951, Transcript.

the West Indies in Jamaica raised the expectations that a proper cultural climate could be established in the Caribbean. In 1943, the British government had appointed the Asquith Commission to look into the possibilities of providing tertiary education in the colonies. As T. W. J. Taylor, the first principal at U.C.W. I., explains:

> The Asquith Commision...made a general recommendation for all the university institutions which were to be developed in colonial territories. During their formative years they were to have a foster mother, the University of London. Before they reached full university status and awarded their own degrees, they were to work for London degrees.[29]

Obviously, being moulded on the London degree meant that the university syllabus was traditionally and conservatively English. Although from the beginning, the ambition was to attain full university status and create their own degree programme, Louis James recalls that when he took up his lectureship at the English Department in 1961, the syllabus was still based on the London Certificate of Teaching, not including any Caribbean texts (Personal interview). However, catering for the entire Caribbean area, the university not only put a strong emphasis on English, but also on French and Spanish. Students were required to study three subjects, of which two had to be language, one being optional and the other Latin with Roman history.

But what was to become one of the university's most immediate and significant contributions to the cultural climate in the West Indies was when the Extra–Mural Department launched the inter–disciplinary journal *CaribbeanQuarterly* in 1949. Printed in two thousand copies by the university's own and newly established press, the first issue stated:

> The *CaribbeanQuarterly* seeks to...work in co–operation with those literary journals which have contributed to the cultural development of the Caribbean... It will aim at accuracy, objectivity, and clean thought, clearly expressed. Above all it seeks to establish and strengthen the tradition of the book and of learning in the Caribbean.[30]

From its inception, the magazine regularly featured poems by local writers, and over the years the journal's commitment to printing the works of local poets continued. In 1958, as a special issue marking the opening of the West Indian Federal Parliament, *Caribbean Quarterly* published *An Anthology of West Indian Poetry*, which included the works of people like George Campbell, Frank Collymore, John Figueroa, George Lamming, Roger

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29 T. W. J. Taylor, 'The University College of the West Indies', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 2.2, January–March 1950, p. 7. For a full account of the establishing of the universtity and its formative years, see Rex Nettleford & Philip Sherlock, *The University of the West Indies: A Caribbean Response to the Challenge of Change* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

30 Editorial, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 1.1, April–June 1949, p. 3.

Mais, Harold Telemaque and Derek Walcott.[31]

As a young aspiring poet growing up in this cultural climate, Walcott set out to learn his craft by imitating a vast range of exemplars and trying on different styles. As he explains: "I knew I was copying and imitating and learning... I knew I had to absorb everything in order to be able to discover what I was eventually trying to sound like" (Hirsch 1979, p. 53). As noted before, among the works he devoured were the classics, but the main emphasis was on a canonical English lyric tradition. True to his conviction that "[y]oung poets should have no individuality,"[32] Walcott initially saw himself as "legitimately prolonging the mighty line of Marlowe, of Milton".[33] The phrase itself is suggestive of his notion of himself as a rightful heir to a British cultural heritage. And as Edward Baugh has pointed out, his earliest recorded poem, entitled '1944' and published in *The Voice of St. Lucia* when Walcott was only fourteen, also reads as "an imitation of Wordsworthian sentiment in Miltonic blank verse" (*Memory as Vision*, p. 8). Up until the mid–1960s this sense of mimicry continued to dominate his works. 'En Mi–Carême' from 1960, for instance, begins "Should I compare that lady to this landscape", deliberately borrowing the opening of Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day".[34]

Generally, the themes in Walcott's earliest verses are also true to an English canonical tradition. 'The Scholarship of Rain', one of six unpublished poems that were broadcast on the *Caribbean Voices* programme in 1951, deals with love and mortality:

> I who studied the leaf's fall
> For something as mortal as time, the lover's excuse
> (...)
> My heart complains of decay
> In all that I have written,
> (...)
> But the animal death of leaves,
> The worm in the rose's cave
> And every heart that grieves
> My heart must understand.[35]

While drawing on 'The Sick Rose' from Blake's *Songs of Experience*, the "lover's

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31 *Caribbean Quarterly*, Federation Commemorative Issue: *An Anthology of West Indian Poetry*, 5.3, April 1958.

32 Derek Walcott, interview with Robert Hamner, *World Literature Written in English*, 16.2, November 1977; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 32. (Hereafter cited as 'Hamner'.)

33 Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says', *What the Twilight Says*, p. 28.

34 Derek Walcott, 'En Mi–Carême', *In A Green Night: Poems 1948–1960*, (1961; 2nd imprint, London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 63.

35 Derek Walcott, 'A Packet for Eros: Scholarship of Rain', *Caribbean Voices*, 5 August 1951.

excuse" in these lines also seems to refer to Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', a piece that has informed several other early Walcott poems. In 'To His Coy Mistress', Marvell's lover attacks his girl's chastity by reminding her somewhat morosely of her mortality: "Thy Beauty shall no more be found", "Worms shall try/ That long preserv'd Virginity:/ And your quaint honour turn to dust."[36] Similarly, in Walcott's 'Go, Lovely Worm' from 1957 — a title which furthermore alludes to Edmund Waller's 'Song' ("Go, lovely Rose") — the poet is snubbed by a vain mistress and addresses a worm, her final lover to whom her fidelity is "compelled": "Go, lovely worm,"

> Bid her who cleans and shrieves
> Her soiled hands in the basin of my mind
> Then wears my heart a bauble for her tears
> How nothing cleaves
> The limbs with such delight
> As thy fine teeth; to the very bone they bite
> In curled concupiscence, breeding no heirs.[37]

In 'The Harbour', which had initially appeared as 'Fishermen Rowing Homeward' in his first and privately published collection *25 Poems*,[38] Walcott also modelled himself on Marvell. This time he drew on the poem 'Bermudas', a title with a special appeal since it placed the West Indies on the map of seventeenth–century English verse. Marvell's poem begins: "Where the remote *Bermudas* ride/ In th'Oceans bosome unespy'd,/ From a small Boat, that row'd along,/ The listening winds receiv'd this Song". And he concludes with the sailors' plea:

> Oh, let our Voice his Praise exalt,
> Till it arrive at Heavens Vault:
> Which thence (perhaps) rebounding, may
> Echo beyond the *Mexique Bay*.
> Thus sung they, in the *English* boat,
> And all the way, to guide their Chime,
> With falling oars they kept the time.
> (pp. 17–8.)

The opening and closure of this poem is redeployed by Walcott in 'The Harbour', which reads:

> The fishermen rowing homeward in the dusk
> Do not consider the stillness through which they move,

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36 Andrews Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H.M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), Vol. I, p. 28. (Subsequent quotations from Marvell's verse are from this work.)

37 Derek Walcott, 'Two Themes on an Old Lute: Go, Lovely Worm', *Bim*, 6.24, June 1957, p. 231.

38 Derek Walcott, *25 Poems* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Guardian Commercial Printery, 1948).

So I, since feelings drown should no more ask
For the safe twilight which your calm hands gave.
And the night, urger of old lies
Winked at by stars that sentry the humped hills,
Should hear no secret faring–forth; time knows
That bitter and sly sea, and love raises walls.
Yet others who now watch my progress outward
On a sea which is crueller than any word
Of love, may see in me the calm my passage makes,
Braving new water in an antique hoax
And the secure from thinking may climb safe to liners
Hearing small rumours of paddlers drowned near stars.
(*In a Green Night*, p. 15.)

Like Marvell's sailors, who hope that their praise may "Echo beyond the *Mexique Bay*", Walcott seems to voice an aspiration that others beyond his native island may see his progress, as he braves "new water in an antique hoax". That ambition was also implicitly stated when he chose to call his first commercially published collection — launched by Jonathan Cape in London in 1962 — *In A Green Night*, a title drawing on Marvell's description in 'Bermudas' of oranges as "golden Lamps in a green Night".

The great appeal of Marvell and of the Metaphysical poets in general seems to have been in their preoccupation with expressing paradoxes through the use of metaphor. In *Another Life* Walcott explains why, at an early stage, he turned from painting to writing poetry:

in every surface I sought
the paradoxical flash of an instant
in which every facet was caught
in a crystal of ambiguities,
(...)
I lived in a different gift,
its element metaphor.
(*Collected Poems*, pp. 200–201.)

Similarly, in his collection *Midsummer* (1984) Walcott complains that "painting cannot capture thought" (*Collected Poems*, p. 478). His early works also reflect this desire to forge a poetry of complex ideas. For instance, 'Soles Occidere et Redire Possunt' (1953) deploys numerous spheric conceits and a Copernican imagery reminiscent of John Donne: "Leave on our eyes the counterfeit delight/ That they were happy. Could they be when the round/ Eyeball of the world revolves in fright?"[39]

Walcott admits that initially, he "hadn't read too many modern poets" (White, p. 153). But through his friend Harold Simmons, he was soon introduced to the works of

39 Derek Walcott, 'Soles Occidere et Redire Possunt', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 3.2, September 1953, pp. 86–7.

T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Auden, Spender and MacNeice, and Walcott recalls his immediate excitement over "seeing the *living* poem in print" (ibid.). George Odlum, one of Walcott's contemporaries, has later stressed the significance of his growing awareness of twentieth–century poetry, "at a time when most of his colleagues in the sixth form of St. Mary's College...were desperately grappling with nineteenth–century Romanticism".[40] In this way, Walcott was quick to emulate the example of Dylan Thomas, as is also apparent from 'A City's Death by Fire', a poem originally included in *25 Poems*. Like the young Heaney, Walcott found in Thomas's works a continuation of a Romantic sensibility and an oppulent style marked by internal rhyme, assonance, and sprung rhythms, that revealed an aural delight in the poetic medium and the English language itself. The music in these lines from 'A City's Death by Fire' is strikingly similar to that of Heaney's student verses: "Loud was the bird–rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales/ Torn open by looting, and white, in spite of the fire" (*Collected Poems*, p. 6).

Elsewhere, Walcott rehearses a different kind of voice, drawing heavily on the works of Eliot, Auden, and the 'Thirties Poets'. In 'Letter to Margareth' (1950):

> Each day the calendar unlocks the tired crowds roaring
> For fun, clerks with inkstained souls, children, women with blonde hair
> And sunglasses, moving in the compulsion of touring
> The paper–wrecked lawns, the dirty and debonair.[41]

While these lines echo the crowd flowing over London Bridge and the "violet hour, when the eyes and back/ Turn upward from the desk" from *The Waste Land*,[42] the general tone of the "dirty and debonair" seems rather Audenesque. Similarly, as several commentators have pointed out,[43] Walcott's 'A Country Club Romance' moulds itself on Auden's poem 'Victor', telling the story of a racially mixed Caribbean couple:

> Laburnum–bright her hair,
> Her eyes were blue as ponds,
> Her thighs, so tanned and bare,
> Sounder than Government bonds.
>
> (...)
>
> He worked in the Civil Service,
> She had this job at the Bank;

40 George Odlum, 'Appreciation of a Walcott Poem', *Voice*, 6 May 1967, p. 5.

41 Derek Walcott, 'Letter to Margareth', *Bim*, 3.12, June 1950, p. 342.

42 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 71.

43 See for instance Cameron King and Louis James, 'In Solitude for Company', in *The Islands In Between* (op. cit.), p. 87, and Stewart Brown, 'The Apprentice', *The Art of Derek Walcott*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1991), pp. 25–7.

When she praised his forearm swerve, his
Brain went completely blank.

O love has its revenges,
Love whom man has devised;
They married and lay down like Slazengers
Together. She was ostracised.[44]

However, the sharp satirical note in this poem ("Her eyes were blue as ponds,/ Her thighs.../ Sounder than Government bonds") can also be linked to the rhetorical tradition of the Trinidadian Calypso, where a singer's skills are measured by his ability to invent original turns of phrase and surprising rhymes.[45]

While representing a modern, twentieth–century poetry, these exemplars also stood as upholders of a long Western lyric tradition. To Walcott, Auden served primarily as a model of classically stringent lyric forms, as becomes evident in a piece like 'Berceuse', which draws on Auden's 'Lay your sleeping head, my Love': "Darling, as you bend to sleep,/ May your mortal breath remain".[46] The same balancing of a conservative awareness of tradition with a twentieth–century outlook marks Eliot's *oeuvre*, and as Laurence Breiner argues, "Walcott like many of his contemporaries inherited the canons of taste established by...Eliot."[47] Undoubtedly Eliot confirmed Walcott's fascination with the Metaphysical poets, and in 'A Lost Age' from 1957, Walcott payed tribute to a canonical, Palgravian literary influence while echoing the concluding passage of *The Waste Land*:

These fragments of a drowned music I like best;
To my vexed English they are quiet seas
As rare as morning breaking in the west,
Or night spent in one honest woman's arms—
Davenant's The Lark now weaves her Watery Nest
And Peele's lyric, A Farewell to Arms,
And Waller's verse that calls the soul a cage
And Blake's phrase for twilight *such, such were the joy.*
(...)
They may, perhaps, my turbulence assuage
And bring the weather of the world to peace
By their storm's centre and mercurial poise.[48]

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[44] Derek Walcott, 'A Country Club Romance', *In a Green Night*, p. 31; the poem was initially published as 'Margaret Verlien Dies' in 1951.

[45] See for instance Keith Warner, *The Trinidad Calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature* (London: Heineman, 1982).

[46] Derek Walcott, 'Berceuse', *Bim*, 4.16, June 1952, p. 235.

[47] Laurence Breiner, 'Walcott's Early Drama', *The Art of Derek Walcott* (op.cit), p. 70.

[48] Derek Walcott, 'Two Themes on an Old Lute: A Lost Age', *Bim*, 6.24, June 1957, pp. 231–2. Compare "These fragments of a drowned music" with Eliot's phrase "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" from *The Waste Land* (*Collected Poems*, ed. cit, p. 79).

Similarly, Eliot's presence is heavily felt in 'Sambo Agonistes' from 1951:

> [L]ooking in her bed I saw bundles of bones,
> Her mouth's dried rose and a soiled laundry of groans
> And a whole world of children dried in my loins.
> "You're worse than a friar",
>
> Said my love in bed as she combed out her hair,
> "Forget" said the swallows parading in air,
> Philomela, Philomela, was all I could hear.[49]

Not only does this passage echo 'A Game of Chess' and 'The Fire Sermon' of *The Waste Land*, but like Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, Walcott's poem makes a tongue–in–cheek reference to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, while translating a classical material into a twentieth–century context.

Together with such seventeenth–century writers as Milton, Donne and Marvell, who had learned the poetic craft by writing in Greek and Latin, Eliot confirmed Walcott's sense of an English–language tradition that was historically linked to a wider word–culture. In his younger years Eliot had written verses in French, greatly influenced by the works of Baudelaire. And this link must also have struck a chord with Walcott, given his mixed St. Lucian background. As a European exemplar, Baudelaire had challenged a turn–of–the–century metropolitan culture by writing verses that broke taboos, taking on board questions of poverty and race relations. Emulating Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Walcott wrote these lines in 'Letter to Margareth': "Barefoot/ Black laughter from those who cannot understand/ The wrongs of the social ladder. Pluck from the root/ This flowering evil of those divided by coins" (op. cit.).

With the arrival of his self–financed *25 Poems* in 1948, Walcott was immediately hailed as the most promising voice in Caribbean poetry. In an article published in *Bim*, Frank Collymore stressed the technical virtues of Walcott's poetry, his "swarming imagery, the deft turn of phrase, the religious motif — above all, the high poetic fervour".[50] As to its essentially imitative nature, Collymore defended Walcott: "there must always be echoes. Every artist must draw on the accummulative heritage of his particular art" (p. 127). Similarly, reviewing *25 Poems* on the *Caribbean Voices*, Roy Fuller expressed his enthusiasm, although he felt that the romantic influence mediated through Dylan Thomas "obtruded too often in Walcott's work", and was "detrimental to [his]

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49 Derek Walcott, 'Sambo Agonistes', *Bim*, 4.15, December 1951, p. 209.

50 Frank Collymore, 'An Introduction to the Poetry of Derek Walcott', *Bim*, 3.10, June 1949, p. 126.

precision, clarity and strength".[51] In an article on new Caribbean writing for the *CaribbeanQuarterly*, Henry Swanzy also commented on the strong influence of English poets on Walcott, saying with reference to 'A City's Death by Fire': "That poem...could have been written, I think, by any good young poet, influenced by the private poets [*sic*] like Dylan Thomas in England. But this is only as it should be; for poets must always be influenced."[52] In the same breath, however, he also called Walcott a "West Indian poet who would, for good or bad, be accepted on his own merits by a London publisher" (pp. 24–5), seeing that as the symptom of a growing body of Caribbean writing that was as yet without a distinct flavour.

If the strong element of imitation in *25 Poems* was generally accepted by the critics as serving a young poet in the early stages of finding his own voice, Walcott's subsequent publications, *Epitaph for the Young* (1949) and *Poems* (1951),[53] were met with an increasing amount of scepticism. Essentially, *Epitaph for the Young* was an attempt to catalogue all his major literary influences in one poem. According to Walcott, "all the influences [were] there...visible, deliberately quoted influences" (Hamner, p. 23). In his own words, it was the "Urtext of *Another Life*", his long autobiographical poem from 1973, which traces his own awakening during his adolescence, somewhat parallel to Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man.* Reviewing *Epitaph for the Young* for *Bim* in 1949, Keith Alleyne expressed his reservations about the poem:

> It is necessary for those West Indians at least who read Walcott to recognize the dilemma in which he finds himself, and which...betrays an embarrassed self–consciousness...the embarrassment of borrowed clothes, no matter how legitimately acquired — the top hat in the tropics... His preoccupations are intellectual, but he has not discovered a native intellectual diet which is palatable.[54]

And he concluded by asking: "Can the West Indian historically project and edit Dante, Baudelaire, Eliot, *et. al.* and claim them as being the right landing stage for our literary adventure?" Similar criticisms were voiced when *Poems* came out in 1951. Speaking on *Caribbean Voices*, Roy Fuller began his review by reaffirming how *25 Poems* had proved

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[51] Roy Fuller, review of *25 Poems*, broadcast on *Caribbean Voices* in 1949. Transcript missing from BBC Archives, but quoted in *Bim*, 4.15, December 1951, p. 224.

[52] Henry Swanzy, 'Caribbean Voices — Prolegomena to a West Indian Culture', *Caribbean Quarterly*, op. cit., p. 25.

[53] Derek Walcott, *Epitaph for the Young: a Poem in XII Cantos* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Advocates Co, 1949); *Poems* (Kingston, Jamaica: Kingston City Printery, 1951).

[54] Keith Alleyne, ' Book Review', *Bim*, 3.11, 1949, p. 267.

Walcott's status as a "promising poet": "The truly promising young poet is usually one who shows himself capable of assimmilating a large number of influences... He need not necessarily produce original thoughts or original emotion".[55] However, Fuller found that his latest poems did not "add up to to make a satisfactory stage in Walcott's progress". A main point of criticism was

> a sense of strain...which comes...from Walcott's trying to make tremendous, generalized, Audenesque statements about things that are too personal or too provincial to bear them...to the remote, impartial reader questions of class and colour in the West Indies simply will not stand in place of or as symbols for the questions of a larger world (ibid.).

It is striking how these two reviews betray their authors' different backgrounds, Alleyne speaking as a fellow Caribbean who notices "the embarrassment of borrowed clothes", and Fuller as the "remote, impartial" Englishman who finds questions of class and colour in the West Indies "too provincial" to accommodate a generalised, Audenesque style of writing. Essentially, though, they are both concerned with the same issue, namely the propriety of assimmilating a Eurocentric, and largely English, tradition. And to be fair, on the basis of these early verses that concern is understandable. Fuelled by "a double kind of excitement" (White, p. 153), Walcott was artistically in a precarious phase, still submitting himself to his formal and schoolmasterish apprenticeship, while gradually trying to probe for a distinct West Indian voice and subject–matter. Compared to his contemporaries, he may well have appeared conservatively English at this stage. In the *Caribbean Voices* programme where his review of *Poems* appeared, Fuller also discussed a handful of other poets, and expressed his general optimism in seeing a growing tendency to experiment, something he felt was driven by a "refusal to be tied down by tradition".[56] The inherent dangers of Walcott's practices are clearly illustrated by some of the poems he submitted to *Caribbean Voices* in 1951. 'Pastorelle', for instance, draws exclusively on a borrowed European climate for its central imagery: "Mortal, we cannot guess our rust/ Like beeches, size/ Autumn's far meanings, winter's worth."[57] In another of these pieces, 'A Sea–Gone Silence', the poet turns his eye to his native St. Lucia. But apart from a couple of striking images in the final stanza ("Home whispers like a shell,/ Like blowing conches of the great liner's horn,/ This silent greenery is a cracked bell" (ibid.)), the poem fails to raise itself above the sort of descriptive post–card verses that

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55 Roy Fuller, 'Derek Walcott's Latest Poems Reviewed', *Caribbean Voices*, 23 March 1952.

56 Roy Fuller, 'Critique', ibid.

57 Derek Walcott, 'A Packet for Eros: Pastorelle', *Caribbean Voices*, 5 August 1951.

previous generations of writers had engaged in.

It can therefore be argued that Walcott's initial appropriation of English–tempered voices prevented an early development towards a 'native' voice. Even *In A Green Night*, where he sought "As climate seeks its style, to write/ Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight/ Cold as the curl'd wave", invited this sort of criticism.[58] However, Walcott stresses that as a young poet he was conscious of his role as an apprentice, and was not fazed by the criticism aimed at him: "I knew I was copying and imitating and learning, and when I was criticized for writing like Dylan Thomas, it didn't bother me at all because I knew what I was doing" (Hirsch 1979, p. 53). And there is also a danger of reading too much culturally into the imitative style of his early verses. It is important that we accept their essential nature as apprentice pieces, and so also to acknowledge Walcott's assertion that "there was no self–contempt, no vision of revenge...for the young poet...there was no other motivation but knowledge" ('What the Twilight Says', p. 7). When Laurence Breiner observes that Walcott was "beset with the disembodied voices of his competing traditions" (*The Art of Derek Walcott*, p. 72), and Stewart Brown similarly argues: "the formally educated young colonial [was] effectively alienated by that education from such alternative traditions as his 'folk' society could provide" (ibid., p. 14), they seem too keen on identifying an early sense of colonial schizophrenia. Such statements ignore the potential for cultural cross–fertilization within the West Indian psyche. Consequently, Brown almost writes as if he has to justify Walcott's choice of exemplars. For instance, when discussing Eliot's temperamental appeal to "the Colonial Apprentice", he stresses Eliot's dual role as "an 'outsider', a 'colonial' [who had] yet...somehow captured the imaginative centre ground", arguing how his "schizophrenic self–image", his "sense of unease, of outsiderness" must have had a particular relevance to Walcott (ibid., pp. 19–20).

But surely, to someone writing in a Caribbean context Eliot represented not so much the colonial outsider, as a contemporary master who essentially wrote and published from the metropolitan centre, as an upholder of a Western tradition. Speaking to Edward Hirsch about his apprenticeship, Walcott pointed out that the influences of Eliot, Thomas and Auden "were the same as those on any other poet writing in England or the United States" (Hirsch 1979, p. 53), affirming his sense of belonging within that cultural

[58] Derek Walcott, 'Islands', *In a Green Night*, p. 77. In their essay 'In Solitude for Company', Cameron King and Louis James thus objected to this passage, saying: " the Caribbean wave is cool not cold and its waves, here neatly 'curl'd', are more characteristically either placid or violent" (*The Islands in Between*, p. 90).

context. And while Eliot's voice clearly communicated a sense of estrangement which Walcott admittedly began to imitate, it was hardly the expression of colonial anguish. Basically, much of the rage in Walcott's early verses does not come across as a genuine sentiment springing from a deep–felt sense of colonial destitution. Rather, it should be seen as one of several masks which the young poet tries on, and as such, it was a mask inherited from a twentieth–century metropolitan culture. This kind of adolescent rehearsing or posturing is expressed in 'Prelude', in which Walcott — looking up to Baudelaire and Eliot — describes poetic composition in terms of suffering:

> And my life, too early of course for the profound cigarette,
> The turned doorhandle, the knife turning
> In the bowels of the hours, must not be made public
> Until I have learned to suffer
> In accurate iambics.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 3.)

That Walcott was mainly rehearsing a certain type of voice in these instances was also suggested in a paper written by Stanley Sharpe and presented on *Caribbean Voices* in 1953. Discussing Walcott's verses, Sharpe picked on "a malaise and cynicism that were widespread in Europe in the 1930s", and commented: "although West Indian problems of poverty and prejudice give some basis for this feeling, Walcott is attracted more by a fashionable attitude than by any real appropriateness".[59]

It is not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that Walcott begins to tackle openly the dilemma of writing from a colonial situation, while drawing on a literary canon inherited from the Empire. But if at this stage he voices a growing awareness of his own cultural marginalisation, he nevertheless keeps stressing his sense of affinity with the poetic tradition to which he was exposed through a "sound colonial education". In 'Leaving School' from 1965, he speaks of his time as an assistant master at his old school, St. Mary's College, a job he held prior to going to university in 1950. The College had just been taken over by a group of Irish Brothers, who not only introduced Walcott to Irish writers like Yeats, Synge and Joyce, but also taught him "a new cynicism for the Empire", a cynicism that nevertheless did not affect his literary tastes: "I was discovering the art of bitterness...learning to hate England as I worshipped her language" (pp. 12–3). Similarly, in 'What the Twilight Says' from 1970, Walcott strikes a surprisingly different note from his 1952 article for the *TLS*, in which he had argued that "West Indian writers...may bring to English literature fresh and vital qualities" ('West Indian Writers',

[59] Stanley Sharpe, 'The Verse of Derek Walcott', *Caribbean Voices*, 1 February 1953.

op. cit.). In 'What the Twilight Says', he notes:

> I would learn that every tribe hoards its culture as fiercely as its prejudices, that English literature, even in the theatre, was hallowed ground and trespass, that colonial literatures could grow to resemble it closely, but could never be considered its legitimate heir. There was folk poetry, colonial poetry, Commonwealth verse, etc., and their function, as far as their mother country was concerned, was filial and tributary (p. 28).

This passage points towards a central dilemma that affected much of the 'constructive criticism' with which West Indian and other new literatures were met during the 1950s and 1960s. It seems that after the collapse of the Empire, the old centre felt an obligation towards helping the former colonies find their feet culturally. Encouraging the new strains of writing, literary commentators generally called out for 'authenticity' and 'originality'. As shown already, one of the main reservations voiced by the English commentators assessing the emerging body of West Indian literature was its essentially derivative nature. Thus, reviewing two anthologies of West Indian poetry in 1961, R.J. Owens attacked what he saw as a body of "fake rather than genuine poetry":

> In Mr. Collymore one is aware of the Georgians; in Mr. R.L.C. McFarlane Yeats, Tennyson and Fitzgerald...; in Mr. E.M. Roach of Hopkins...in Mr. Erroll Hill of D.H. Lawrence, and Mr. Walcott of almost everyone. Colonialism may be a dead force politically, but it is very much alive culturally.[60]

Owens furthermore pointed out that "honest criticism can help the poet to find his own voice by exposing the inner emptiness bedevilling much of the present rag–bag ecleticism of style" (p. 123), and concluded by noting that until someone could establish "the virtues of colloquial speech" in written form, literature in the Caribbean would "remain minor and bastard" (p. 127). On one level, Owens's article seems genuinely concerned about the dangers of letting a colonial hangover impede the emergence of a distinct West Indian literature. However, to Walcott this sort of argument also betrays a form of protectionism, a way of perpetuating a hierachic dichotomy set up by the culture of the Empire. Owens's proposed version of an authentic West Indian literature is reduced to a folksy, demotic type of writing which must purge itself of literary influences in order to avoid becoming "bastard" or "pretentious". This would involve cutting off part of an inheritance which Walcott, during his schooling and his apprenticeship, had internalised.

It was with the emergence of such cultural attitudes during the 1950s and 1960s that Walcott began to address a taken–for–granted perception of himself as a natural heir to a

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60 R. J. Owens, ' West Indian Poetry' (review of two anthologies of West Indian poetry, issued by *Kykoveral* (No. 22, 1957) and *Caribbean Quarterly* (5.3, 1958)), *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 7, December 1961, p. 120.

British literary tradition. In 'What the Twilight Says' he suddenly admits to seeing in his earliest works a "yearning to be adopted" (p. 27), and similar sentiments are voiced in *Another Life*, when the poet looks back on his apprenticeship years:

> The accolade, the accolade.
> Tea with the British Council Representative,
> tannin, calfskin, gilt, and thank you vellum much,
> of course you will soon shed your influences,
> (...)
> I am hoisted on silvery chords upward,
> eager for the dropped names like sugar cubes.
> Eliot. Plop. Benjamin Britten. Clunk. Elgar. Slurp.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 248.)

This newly gained wariness of a proprietorial British culture also informed Walcott's further development towards a distinct Caribbean voice in his two collections *The Castway and Other Poems* (1965) and *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969).[61] Both books grapple with the way in which centuries of slavery and colonialism have relegated the West Indians from History, and robbed them of their claim to a cultural heritage. 'Air' from *The Gulf* quotes as its epigraph a passage from Anthony Froude's late–nineteenth–century study, *The English in the West Indies*: "There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own" (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 86). Spurred by such imperialistic accounts, Walcott begins to commemorate those peoples who have been "devoured" and silenced by History, from the indigenous Arawaks and Caribs, who were exterminated by the first European explorers, to the African slaves and the indentured labourers brought over from India. 'Air' concludes: "There is too much nothing here" (ibid., p. 87).

This sense of inhabiting a topography in which an indigenous culture has not been allowed to take root is central to both books. In 'The Swamp' from *The Castway*, the rainforest "begins nothing. Limbo of cracker convict, Negroes./ Its black mood/ Each sunset takes a smear of your life's blood" (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 5). And in 'Laventille', "[t]he Middle passage never guessed its end./ This is the height of poverty/ for the desperate and black" (ibid., p. 27). But Walcott's artistic quest lies in turning this 'nothingness' into an Adamic situation, in which the poet is privileged to shape a voice that can celebrate his topography. In 'Crusoe's Journal' Walcott hails "our profane Genesis",

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61 Derek Walcott, *The Castaway and Other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), and *The Gulf and Other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969). Together with *Sea Grapes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) and *The Star–Apple Kingdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), these books are reprinted in Walcott's *Poems: 1965–1980* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992).

> whose Adam speaks that prose
> which, blessing some sea–rock, startles itself
> with poetry's surprise,
> in a green world, one without metaphors
> (...)
> parroting our master's
> style and voice, we make his language ours.
> (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 45.)

Voicing his colonial identity in such instances, Walcott also lays claim on his European inheritance. Alluding to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Book of Genesis, he speaks not only as a post–colonial Man Friday or Caliban–figure. Given his mixed West Indian background, he also embodies Crusoe and Prospero, Adamic figures who have been exiled from their cultural hinterland. In this way, as a Caribbean poet Walcott represents both castaway and New World artificer. Throughout both collections, he constantly draws attention to his English ancestry, as if to manifest his right as a colonial to its cultural baggage. In 'The Train' from *The Gulf*, he asks during a visit to England: "Where was my randy white grandsire from?/ He left here a century ago" (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 74). Struck by "the guiltless, staring faces" that "divide like tracks before me as I come", he notes: "Like you, grandfather, I cannot change places,/ I am half–home." And subsequently, as if to address a protectionistic British establishment, he demonstratively writes a 'Homage to Edward Thomas'.

This need to exercise his right as a colonial poet to work within a canonical Western tradition also informs the obituary Walcott wrote for the *Trinidad Guardian* after Eliot's death in 1965. As I have already argued, too much can be read into Walcott's early imitations of Eliot in terms of cultural schizophrenia. And if Eliot's colonial background has become part of Walcott's awareness of him during the 1960s, Walcott is the keener on portraying him as a legitimate spokesperson and upholder of a Western, Eurocentric tradition, as a true "Peasant Mandarin". In his obituary, he notes: "Like Arnold, the figure he most resembles...Eliot's anguish lay in intellectual doubt, in the ratiocination with spiritual acceptance."[62] Walcott elaborates:

> On one hand he revitalised poetry by destroying existing poetic diction, while on the other he appeared to preserve what he destroyed.
>
> Yet there was nothing schizoid about him as a poet, in fact he was not a split intelligence, but...a gatherer, an astute magpie who could turn his pastiche exercises, from the minor Elizabethans, from La Forgue [*sic*], into poetry, a unifying voice that in his later years could speak in the voice of Dante, Milton and Vergil.

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62 Derek Walcott, 'T. S. Eliot — Master of an Age', *Trinidad Guardian*, 10 January 1965, p. 3.

Ironically, the insistence with which Walcott has been placing himself as a West Indian poet within a European tradition was not only provoked by the cultural protectionism of the old centre. It can also be seen as a response to the emerging nationalist and post–colonial debate of the 1950s and 1960s. In 'What the Twilight Says' Walcott describes the highly politicised intellectual climate in the Caribbean during the early decades of finding a national identity: "now the intellectuals, courting and fearing the mass, found values in it that they had formerly despised. They apotheosized the folk form, insisting that calypsos were poems" (pp. 30–1). Voicing his own experience, he elaborated:

> for the colonial artist the enemy was not the people...but...those who had elected themselves as protectors of the people,...who cried out that black was beautiful...Their rough philosophies were meant to coarsen every grace, to demean courtesy, to brook no debate (p. 31).

This climate had been partly fuelled by the works of a previous generation of intellectuals. Walcott recalls his own early response to the works of Césaire and Fanon, who had introduced the term *négritude* in the 1930s:

> the young Frantz Fanon and the already ripe and bitter Césaire were manufacturing the home–made bombs of their prose poems, their drafts for revolution... They were blacker. They were poorer. Their anguish was tragic and I began to feel deprived of blackness and poverty (ibid., p. 11).

It is worth noting that the type of estrangement described here is not from the culture of the Empire, but from those new voices who sought to articulate the culture of the colonised. Coming from the "brown bourgeoisie", Walcott was marginalised by this intellectual debate, and soon felt that "a Catholic destitution was a state of grace which being part–white and Methodist I could never achieve" (p. 14). Similar sentiments are voiced in 'The Schooner *Flight*', where Shabine says:

> After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
> when the power swing to their side.
> The first chain my hands and apologize, "History";
> the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 350.)

However, far from turning his back on notions of *négritude*, Walcott has sought to distinguish between the cultural debate instigated by Césaire, Fanon and Senghor, and the intellectual climate of the 1950s and 1960s. In an article written for the *Trinidad Guardian* in 1964, Walcott reported from an international poets' conference in Berlin, which Césaire

also attended. Describing the opening debate, Walcott noted with some sarcasm that "[o]ne of the issues was the preservation and assertion of the African personality, of 'negritude', a concept that was most eloquently presented by white French and German professors".[63] And he continued:

> Césaire...proposed that the concept was dated, the theme of an earlier generation, his and Senghor's, both of whom were schooled in France, who loved French literature, who found themselves as Negroes, in a particular position in the Europe of the day.

A Creole response to a Eurocentric Western culture, Césaire's notion of *négritude* also built on an acknowledged debt to the Western tradition of humanist thought. And according to Walcott, this marked the crucial difference between Césaire and the new generation of intellectuals, who developed a dismissive attitude towards their European inheritance. Prior to his coverage of the 1964 conference in Berlin, Walcott had written an appreciation of Césaire and Leopold Senghor for the *Trinidad Guardian*, entitled 'The Necessity of Negritude'. And once again, he had warned against the adoption of too revolutionary attitudes:

> Many Negro poets are conducting an experiment in racial self–analysis which involves finding those qualities in their personality which they consider distinctive from those of the white writer...
>
> It is the opposite of the integration movement. A great deal of modern Negro poetry and prose belligerently asserts its isolation, its difference, and sometimes its psychic superiority.[64]

This is where the irony deepens, because even this more antagonistic strain of *négritude* also betrays the influence of a metropolitan, European intellectual climate. When the cultural debate in the Caribbean started to become politically charged, it was very much owing to those individuals who had been to Europe or the United States, and there witnessed a growing Commonwealth and post–colonial debate. Even after the emergence of tertiary education in the West Indies, many Caribbeans still went to their European 'mother countries' for their degrees.[65] During the 1960s, it seems that the old centre served as an intellectual meeting ground, where ex–colonials could exchange views and

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63 Derek Walcott, 'Berlin: the ABC of Negritude', *Trinidad Guardian*, 18 October 1964, p. 11.

64 Derek Walcott, 'Necessity of Negritude', *Trinidad Guardian*, 28 September 1964, p. 8. For a general discussion of the wider cultural debate concerning *négritude* in the late–1950s and 1960s, see 'The *négritude* Movement' in Robert Fraser, *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

65 More and more people also went to the States and Canada for their education. Notions of *négritude* were thus also closely linked with the emergence of the Black Power Movement, which in turn had grown out of the political ideas of the Jamaican nationalist Stokeley Carmichael.

experiences. One of the most important events during that decade — and one which, according to Louis James, "raised expectations that the real centre for West Indian Arts was going to be in London" (Personal interview) — was when the Caribbean Artists Movement was formed. As Anne Walmsley points out in her study of the movement: "By 1966 London had lost two of its centres of West Indian cultural ferment: *Caribbean Voices*...[and] *The West Indian Gazette*... But the West Indian Students Centre hosted a variety of cultural activities".[66] Thus, it was also here that Edward Kamau Brathwaite and other Caribbean intellectuals living in Britain started having regular meetings to discuss the future of a national West Indian culture. Louis James, who also took part, recalls that the general climate at the West Indian Students Centre "was very political. It was a time when Fanon and Carmichael were very much on people's minds, and it was very intense and quite fierce" (Personal interview).

In 'What the Twilight Says' as well as 'The Muse of History', Walcott sought to confront those who championed a total rejection of a colonial cultural inheritance. Such a dismissal, he argued, merely conforms to Metropolitan expectations of cultural progress, and perpetuates the cycle of historical degradation. It reduces the scope and potential of New World writing to the politically–approved posture of the sufferer, a posture which is in fact as inhibiting and stereotypical as that of the black minstrels. In 'The Muse of History' he notes: "In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters."[67] He continues:

> Their view of Caliban is of the enraged pupil. They cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is viewed as servitude, not as victory (p. 39).

In this way, drawing on Eliot's sense of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Walcott legitimises the use of a classic European heritage and rehabilitates those early patrician writers who came out of the New World: "They, too, are victims of tradition, but they remind us of our debt to the great dead, that those who break a tradition first hold it in awe... their veneration subtilizes an arrogance which is tougher than violent rejection" (ibid., p. 36).

One of the early Caribbean poets commemorated for this sort of veneration and

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66 Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972* (op. cit.), p. 34.

67 Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says*, p. 37.

arrogance is Saint–John Perse, the author of *Anabasis* (which Eliot translated into English). In fact, Perse has been a central presence to Walcott, whose Crusoe–poems in *The Castaway* and *The Gulf* clearly bear a resemblance to Perse's 'Images à Crusoé' from *Éloges*. Perse's castaway is a "Vieil homme aux mains nues,": "tu pleurais, j'imagine, quand de tours de l'Abbaye,/ comme un flux, s'epanchait le sanglot des cloches sur la/ Ville."[68] Similarly, in 'Crusoe's Island', Walcott depicts a "bearded hermit", "Exiled by a flaming sun" and listening to "The chapel's cowbell": "I am borne by the bell/ Back to boyhood// I can never go back."

> nothing I can learn
> From art or loneliness
> Can bless...as the bell's
> Transfiguring tongue can bless.
> (*Poems: 1965–1980*, pp. 48–51.)

As to his — and so also Perse's — use of the Crusoe mask in a Caribbean cultural context, Walcott has said:

> One of the more positive aspects of the Crusoe idea is that in a sense every race that has come to the Caribbean has been brought here under situations of servitude or rejection, and that is the metaphor of the shipwreck... Then you look around you and you have to make your own tools. Whether that tool is a pen or a hammer, you are building in a situation that is Adamic.[69]

It is worth noting that Walcott tends to juxtapose Perse — somewhat provocatively — with the example of Aimé Césaire. Already in 1964, when discussing the 'Necessity of Negritude', he referred to Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* in this way:

> This is a West Indian poem, and its subject is race as openly...as...Saint–John Perse's "Éloges" or "Pour Fêter Un Enfance" is about being a white child in the tropics.
>
> The two poems make an interesting contrast, but their resemblances, their primal sources are very alike. They are separated from the poetry of Senghor by an entire experience, by geography and by traditions ('Necessity of Negritude').

This pairing of Perse and Césaire had a dual purpose. From a Caribbean perspective, Walcott dismisses the notion of a homogenous movement of *négritude*, using Perse to underscore the cultural differences between Césaire's poetry and Senghor's African identity. Furthermore, by drawing a parallel between the works of a black and a white

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68 "Old man, exposed and naked," "I imagine you are weeping when the chapel's tower/ like a flux, sheds the sobbing of bells upon the village." Saint–John Perse, 'Images à Crusoé: Les Cloches', *Éloges*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 11.

69 Derek Walcott, interview with Edward Hirsch, *Paris Review*, 101, Winter 1986; reprinted in *Conversations*, pp. 107–8. (Hereafter cited as 'Hirsch 1986'.)

upper–class West Indian, he points towards the possibility of a heterogeneous, creolised, yet distinct Caribbean literature — clearly also with a mind to his own troubled identity as a part–white, middle–class writer. Later, in 'The Muse of History', Walcott pushes this comparison further, noting that although Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* sounds "like a poem written tonally in Creole", its diction is in fact purely French (p. 49). And in terms of literary form, he points out:

> there is a strict, synonymous armature shared within the tradition of the metropolitan language, and which both [Perse and Césaire] must have felt to be an inheritance despite their racial and social differences, despite the distance of Perse from the dialect of house servants and of fishermen, despite the fealty of Césaire to that dialect (p. 50).

Behind Walcott's juxtaposition of Perse and Césaire is the notion that West Indian literature needs a medium where orality and literacy, the "peasant" and the "mandarin", can go hand in hand, and that the literary culture which the era of colonialism has passed on is in fact capable of accommodating this need. As noted already, this relies on Eliot's sense of tradition, but it can furthermore be linked to the example set by Joyce. In 'Leaving School' Walcott recalls how he adopted Stephen Dedalus as an early literary hero (pp. 12–3), and elsewhere he has praised Joyce for his ambition "to [be] writ[ing] for his race", while having "the most universal mind since Shakespeare" (Hirsch 1986, p. 105). Once again, such a negotiation between what Walcott terms "provinciality" and "universality" (ibid.) requires a double kind of arrogance. As I have pointed out in connection with Heaney, it is important when discussing Joyce as a post–colonial exemplar that we acknowledge fully his understanding of artistic autonomy as a double–edged sword. When Joyce took on the classical Western heritage and made Dublin the centre of his twentieth–century Odyssey, and when he flaunted his knowledge of the history of English language in the 'Oxen of the Sun' chapter of *Ulysses*, it was not just a revolt against British cultural protectionism. It also reflected the colonial artist's arrogant pride in the English language, an inheritance that was being questioned by the cultural myopia of extreme Irish nationalism and Celtic Revivalism.[70] This is what underlies the "blasphemous arrogance"[71] of the (post–)colonial artist, an arrogance that allows that "double kind of excitement" which drove Walcott in his own search for a distinct, creolised West Indian voice. Already in his *TLS* article from 1952, he mentioned

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[70] Among the characters portrayed most scathingly in *Ulysses* are the Irish nationalist and Haines, the Englishman who nurtures a romantic vision of an independent Ireland where the Gaelic language is spoken by all.

[71] Walcott's description of Stephen Dedalus in 'Leaving School', p. 13.

the importance of learning the craft of English before the oral elements of West Indian culture could be accommodated:

> to make the transition from the Calypso, or the folk–song that is sung, to the poem which is written down, or from the folk–tale (the Anancy story), which is told by word of mouth, to the short story or the novel, a certain standard of education is necessary. Primary schools have taught how, and secondary schools what, to read and write ('West Indian Writers').

The word "transition" is well worth noting, because it reveals Walcott's idea of the language on the page — the language of poetry — as a construct, a self–contained medium rather than a transcript, something which again links with his ambition to *forge* the consciousness of his race, and to construct in his work what Heaney terms an "art speech".

It is this autonomous status of the language of art which has allowed Walcott to draw on a metropolitan language tradition, while seeking to accommodate his West Indian identity. Speaking to Edward Hirsch, he notes that his early ambition as a Caribbean poet was "that a West Indian or an Englishman could read a single poem, each with his own accent, without either one feeling that it was written in dialect" (Hirsch 1979, p. 53). This statement reveals Walcott's own experience of how open and flexible the language on the page really is. What is important is to allow oneself to read a poem with one's own inflection of speech. According to Walcott, this was why as a schoolboy in the tropics he could read Wordsworth. A sense of colonial anguish only occured in those instances when "[t]he teacher and the child were made to believe that...poetry required imitation of the accent of the original tongue" (Brown & Johnson, p. 177).

This sense of the poetic medium would also have facilitated Walcott's comparatively unproblematic adoption of Eliot as an exemplar. Heaney, we have seen, has made a connection between his early unease towards Eliot's works and the fact that Eliot strove in his later years for a purified poetic language, a language which implicitly seemed to patronise and relegate Heaney's sense of his vernacular inheritance. To Walcott, maintaining a link between a vernacular culture and an imperial, standardised language has been a central concern. In a recent review, he attacked the Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau for his co–authored manifesto, *Eloge de la Créolité* (1989), which called for the introduction of a Creole orthography, and argued that Césaire's quest for a Creole poetry had failed due to a "most pure and measured French idiom".[72] In

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72 Chamoiseau quoted by Walcott in his review 'A Letter to Chamoiseau', *What the Twilight Says*, p. 223.

response Walcott merely noted that the "meter of the manifesto's polemical aesthetic is...academic, even classical...[and] urges *oralité* in the solemn parentheses of the lectern" (ibid., p. 224). Such measures to abandon a grammatical French or English in favour of a new Creole orthography in the Caribbean is seen by Walcott as a kind of cultural self–amputation, a "revenge on history...[which] is very short–sighted, and...fatal".[73]

> It is crippling and limiting the width of a child's mind if, at an early age, he's not taught what is correct speech (and there is no question about what is correct speech, correct speech is agreed upon by what grammer is)...And if the subtlety of a philosophical thought contradicts itself in dialect then you have no confidence in the dialect and you have more confidence in the imperial language, the source of the language (ibid., p. 77).

Another problem which Walcott identifies in connection with constructing a Creole orthography is that there is no such thing as *a* West Indian dialect. As he points out: "It is very difficult, in one sense, for a Trinidadian to understand a Jamaican, or for a Jamaican to understand a Barbadian".[74] Consequently, Walcott argues that the poet's function "remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official [language]" ('The Muse of History', p. 49), thus also making the text intelligible to a wider audience.

Maintaining such a conceptual distinction between the *literacy* of English and the *orality* of a West Indian vernacular culture has been central to Walcott's negotiations as a "Peasant Mandarin". 'Cul de Sac Valley' from *The Arkansas Testament* describes Creole as "a tongue they speak/ in, but cannot write".[75] And *Midsummer* reiterates the idea of the poetic voice as an artifice that transforms the oral by forcing it towards alphabet and hieroglyph: "Ah, to have/ a tone colloquial and stiff,// ...all synthesis in one heraldic stroke,/ Like Li Po or a Chinese laundry mark!"[76] Walcott's first attempt to deploy Creole speech was in his group of sonnets from 1958 called 'Tales of the Islands'. Sonnet VI reads as a "peasant" appropriation of a 'high' literary form, and is reminiscent of the way in which Tony Harrison has relied extensively on the sonnet to explore his vernacular inheritance:

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73 Derek Walcott, interview with Anthony Milne, *Sunday Express*, 14 March 1982; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 75.

74 Derek Walcott, interview with Sharon Ciccarelli, in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro–American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979); reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 42.

75 Derek Walcott, 'Cul de Sac Valley', *The Arkansas Testament* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 10.

76 Derek Walcott, *Midsummer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 19.

> Poopa, da' was a fête! I mean it had
> Free rum free whisky and some fellars beating
> Pan from one of them band in Trinidad,
> And everywhere you turn was people eating
> And drinking and don't name me but I think
> They catch his wife with two tests up the beach
> While he drunk quoting Shelley with "Each
> Generation has its angst, but we has none"
> And wouldn't let a comma in edgewise.
> (Black writer chap, one of them Oxbridge guys.)
> And it was round this part once that the heart
> Of a young child was torn from it alive
> By two practitioners of native art,
> But that was long before this jump and jive.
> (*Collected Poems*, pp. 24–5.)

And in 'Parang' from *In A Green Night*: "Man, I suck me tooth when I hear/ How dem croptime fiddlers lie,/ And de wailing, kiss–me–arse flutes/ That bring water to me eye!" (*Collected Poems*, p. 33). Significantly, though, both of these pieces seem to come from the hand of Walcott–the–playwright rather than Walcott–the–poet. Generally, Walcott has relied more on dialect in his plays,[77] and in this connection he notes: "Whenever a persona arrives, the expression of dialect is, in a way, an expression of different personae. The basic language, out of which that dialect emerges, comes out of a dramatization through the medium of masks or faces or characters."[78] Similarly, these poems are written as dramatic masks that substitute Walcott's own poetic voice. While 'Tales of the Islands, VI' slips towards a more standardised English in the last four lines, it is only to signal the arrival of a different persona. In 'Parang', the same voice is heard throughout, but here a literary note momentarily creeps in and arguably threatens the authenticity of the sustained colloquial tone:

> I old, so the young crop won't
> Have these claws to reap their waist,
> But I know "do more" from "don't"
> Since the grave cry out "Make haste!"

These early poems prefigure the sort of dramatic orchestration we find in *Omeros*, where the voice of the poet–narrator is joined by a wider chorus of personae. Notice the balancing of narrative and dialogue in the following passage, which describes a meeting between two of the book's central characters, Seven Seas and Philoctete:

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[77] See especially his early folk plays *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Ti–Jean and His Brothers* (1958), *Malcochon* (1959), and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), all of which are collected in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

[78] Derek Walcott, interview with Charles Rowell, *Callaloo*, 34, Winter 1988; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 130.

Lonely as a bachelor's plate, a full moon cleared
the suds of the cloud. Seven Seas felt the moonlight
on his hands, washing his wares. The dog appeared.

He scraped rice and fish into its enamel plate
and said, "Watch the bones, eh!"; then he smelt Philoctete
entering the yard, making sure to hook back the gate

so the dog wouldn't slide out. He said: "Nice moonlight,"
following the man's sore's smell. "No news about your friend, yet?"
he asked in English. Philoctete sat on the same

step he chose every moonlight and said in Creole:
"They say he drown." The dog chewed noisily.
"His name
is what he out looking for, his name and his soul,"

Seven Seas said.
"Where that?"
They both looked at the moon.
It made the yard clean, it clarified every leaf.
"Africa," the blind one said. "He go come back soon."
(*Omeros*, pp. 153–4.)

Here dialect is not merely used to distinguish the characters' speaking voices from the poet's narrative. While Seven Seas begins the conversation in English, he takes the cue from Philoctete and continues in Creole. This serves as a subtle speech act which signals the shift to a more intimate level of communication, the Creole element underlining Philoctete's anguish over Achille's disappearance. In addition, it suggests how Achille's identity crisis ("His name/ is what he our looking for, his name and his soul") is a commonly shared experience that belongs to the private realm of the Caribbean consciousness, which a less vernacular mode of speech cannot accommodate.

While such instances of ventriloquism and orchestration are common in Walcott's *oeuvre*, they need to be distinguished from the balanced use of vernacular speech in a poem like 'The Schooner *Flight*'. Seemingly also written as a dramatic monologue, Walcott has nevertheless noted that there are passages in the poem where the language is "a little too elevated" to represent authentically Shabine's persona: "When that happens the persona has not remained completely whole...but I also didn't want to restrict the possibility of man's intelligence at a pitch to exclude it" (Rowell, p. 130). Consequently, as Peter Burian also points out in his discussion of 'The Schooner *Flight*': "Shabine speaks...in a poetic dialogue which...is not the spoken language of a particular place and time but an amalgam of vernacular and literary idioms."[79] This amalgamation of the

[79] Peter Burian, 'Derek Walcott's Odyssey', *The Poetics of Derek Walcott*, p. 364. See also Heaney's remark in 'The Murmur of Malvern', quoted earlier in this chapter.

literary and the colloquial is evident from the very beginning where the poem asserts its own textuality, echoing the opening lines of Langland's *Piers Plowman*:

> In idle August, while the sea soft,
> and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim
> of this Caribbean, I blow out the light
> by the dreamless face of Maria Conception
> to ship as a seaman on the schooner *Flight*.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 345.)

At the core of this idiomatic balancing is the double role of Shabine's persona as sailor–narrator *and* poet. Shabine, it becomes clear, also speaks (or writes) as Walcott's extended voice. And implicit in his reference to his own poetic craft is the acknowledgement of a purified speech, of the poem's linguistic role as a construct mediating between the page and his "common language":

> when I write
> this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,
> my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight*.
> (Ibid., p. 347.)

Considering the notion of poetic construct in Walcott's voice, it would however be misleading to look at the vernacular, colloquial element and the elevated literary mode as two opposing strands in his works. Speaking of the vernacular culture which shaped him, Walcott argues:

> I was lucky to be born as a poet in a tradition that uses poetry as demonstration, as theatre... It is the simple eloquence and delight in polysyllables that you can get in knocking rhetoric...in people making speeches,...in the extravagant care that the West Indian takes in cursing someone else (Hirsch 1979, p. 57).

As noted before, this delight in rhetoric is found in the surviving folk tradition of the Calypso, and it partly reflects an oral tradition which has its roots back to an African inheritance. But it is also something that has been nurtured by Elizabethan English. Speaking to Nancy Schoenberger, Walcott has pointed out: "If you hear a guy from Barbados, or Jamaica, speaking English, and you listen to that speech, you hear seventeenth–century constructions."[80] This link between a West Indian vernacular culture and seventeenth–century English has previously been explored by writers like V. S. Reid,

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80 Derek Walcott, interview with Nancy Schoenberger, *Threepenny Review*, Fall 1983; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 89. (Hereafter cited as 'Schoenberger'.)

whose novels, as Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes, "carefully recreate the cultural and literary influence of the King James Bible on Jamaican speech".[81]

This should also be taken into account when considering the derivative style of Walcott's early works. It is significant that he has noted in connection with *Henri Christophe* — his play from 1950 which was essentially a Shakespearean revenge tragedy with a Caribbean theme — that "the Jacobean style, its cynical, aristocratic flourish came naturally to this first play" ('What the Twilight Says', p. 12). While such a statement can be taken as a tribute to his colonial education, Walcott also maintains that, given the rhetorical culture of the Caribbean, "my relationship to what's called Jacobean by critics is not nostalgia" (Schoenberger, p. 89). And Walcott still occasionally allows his voice to reach what seems a somewhat mannered rhetorical pitch. In *The Bounty* — his most recent collection of poetry — he thus vents his personal anger in this way:

> Howl, Timon, and turn
> your scabbed back to the sun's fire, into the salt that seals it
> with its stinging. The true faith is Job's poised curse
> on a lost reputation, my name and the envy that steals it
> and stuffs it between her thighs, and its mouldering purse.[82]

Deploying a diction that is steeped in Shakespeare as well as the Bible, these lines can also be seen as an attempt to recreate a formally elevated tone reminiscent of the Caribbean vernacular culture.

Walcott's balancing of the vernacular and the rhetorical has also informed his negotiations between an American and a British tradition of writing: "the casual, colloquial force of American poery has appealed to me. And yet, behind it all, I have a strong sense of structure, which is an English thing, because I live with a structured, formal public kind of expression in Calypso" (Hirsch 1979, p. 62). One American poet who influenced Walcott greatly during the 1980s, was Robert Lowell. In *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981) — parts of which are set in Lowell's New England — Walcott began to gravitate towards a relaxed, autobiographical speaking voice:

> Around the cold pool in the metal light
> of New Year's morning, I choose one of nine
> cast-iron umbrellas set in iron tables

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81 Sandra Pouchet Paquet, 'The Fifties', *West Indian Literature* (op. cit.), p. 53. In an interview from 1968, Walcott points towards the strong influence which Reid and some of the other West Indian novelists have had on his generation of poets: "we couldn't have had [Edward Brathwaite's] section about the Rasta Man except that Roger Mais had already written that book *Brother Man*. And I couldn't have written certain things except that I had watched how closely the novelists used the language." (DerekWalcott, interview with Dennis Scott, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 14.1&2, 1968; reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 13).

82 Derek Walcott, 'To recede like a snail...', *The Bounty* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p.34.

> for work and coffee. The first cigarette
> triggers the usual fusillade of coughs.
> ('The Hotel Normandy Pool', *Collected Poems*, p. 439.)

This late–Lowellian voice also formed the basis for Walcott's diary–like meditations in *Midsummer* (1984), as well as the title–sequence from *The Arkansas Testament* (1987).

Generally, Walcott links a colloquial American tradition to the example of Walt Whitman. However, from a late–twentieth–century perspective he laments the fact that Whitman's colloquiality has degenerated into a tradition of 'free verse', which Walcott essentially identifies with a misinterpretation of the modernists' formal experimentations. Hence his preference for an exemplar like Lowell, who balanced the colloquial with an informed sense of poetic form:

> His verse...had the casual symmetry of a jacket draped on a chair, genius in shirtsleeves. He has written about the stiffness that paralyzed his metre, how he found its rigidities unbearable to recite, skipping words when he read in public to contract them like asides... Still his free verse was not a tieless metre. Debt to ancestry, to the poets who had been his masters, went too deep for that.[83]

Similarly, Walcott hails the work of Robert Frost along these lines: "Frost's writing achieved a vernacular elation in tone, not with the cheap device of dialect spelling or rustic vocabulary, but with a clean ear and a fresh eye."[84] Also, defending Pound's lines as being broken but consistently iambic, he has noted: "For a lot of people in [American] colleges, the tradition begins at a broken point...But if you don't know what you have broken, then you cannot know what you are doing" (Hamner, pp. 31–2). As to Whitman, Walcott lists him in 'The Muse of History' as one of those early New World writers whose work grew out of their veneration for a received tradition.

Elsewhere, he elaborates on Whitman's celebratory, colloquial exuberance, saying: "[he] proclaim[ed] a new form, a new breadth for his new country, in a line as long as its new horizons, opening up poetry in the same way that his pioneers were opening up America."[85] Implicit here is Walcott's notion that "by a country's cast/ topography delineates its verse", as it was expressed in 'Homage to Edward Thomas' (*Poems*, p. 75). This sense of interdependency between poetic form and the topography of the poet's landscape is also central to his own West Indian voice. Thus, Walcott describes the Caribbean as a "Baroque culture" whose "aesthetic [is] based on vegetation": "The shape

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83 Derek Walcott, 'On Robert Lowell', *What the Twilight Says*, p. 92.

84 DerekWalcott, 'Robert Frost', ibid., p. 197.

85 Derek Walcott, 'Crocodile Dandy: Les Murray', ibid., p. 190.

of what grows out of [the Caribbean soil] is convoluted... I mean, the landscape has been criticized by writers coming down to the Caribbean and feeling it out of control, excessive".[86] While striving for a colloquial force, Walcott also tends to combine descriptiveness with a syntactical intricacy that reflects the impenetrable richness of his landscape. In *Midsummer*, for instance:

> This Spanish port, piratical in diverseness,
> with its one–eyed lighthouse, this damned sea of noise,
> this ocher harbor, mantled by its own scum,
> offers, from white wrought–iron balconies,
> the nineteenth–century view.
> (*Midsummer*, p. 14.)

And similarly, in 'A Santa Cruz Quartet' from *The Bounty*:

> In late–afternoon light the tops of the breadfruit leaves
> are lemon and the lower leaves are waxen viridian
> with the shaped shadows greenish black over the eaves
> of the shops and the rust–crusted fences that are Indian
> red, sepia, and often orange.
> (*The Bounty*, p. 77.)

This kind of descriptiveness often pulls Walcott's voice in the direction of an elevated, almost Victorian mode, something that has been criticised by numerous commentators. In this way, reviewing *The Castaway* for the *London Magazine* in 1966, Alan Ross objected to "the lush and overblown qualities of Walcott's verse at the expense of its clarity".[87] Nevertheless, it forms part of Walcott's project of forging an alphabet that may encompass his West Indian experience, an alphabet he began developing already in 'A Sea–Chantey' from *In a Green Night*: "Anguilla, Adina,/ Antigua, Canelles,/ Andreuille, all the *l*'s,/ Voyelles, of the liquid Antilles" (*Collected Poems*, p. 44). Later, in 'Sainte Lucie', he performed a similar task, hoarding the words ceremoniously on the page:

> Pomme arac,
> otaheite apple,
> pomme cythère,
> moubain,
> z'anananas
> (...)
> Come back to me,
> my language.

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[86] Schoenberger, pp. 91–2. Walcott's use of the term "Baroque" seems deliberately provocative, since historically, it is a distinctly European cultural phenomenon.

[87] Alan Ross, review of *The Castway*, *London Magazine*, 5.6, January 1966, p. 88. See also Christopher Hope, 'Colonial Outposts', review of *Sea Grapes*, *London Magazine*, 16.6, February–March 1977, p. 82; Roy Fuller's review of *The Gulf*, *London Magazine*, 9.8, November 1969, p. 89; and John Figueroa, 'Sea Memories', review of *Midsummer*, *London Magazine*, 24.9 & 10, December 1984/ January 1985, p. 129.

Come back,
cacao,
grigri,
solitaire,
ciseau
the scissor–bird.
(*Collected Poems*, p. 310.)

This sort of naming or cataloguing is essentially Homeric. As noted earlier, Walcott adopted at an early stage Homer as a literary father–figure, and in *Omeros* the forging of a West Indian epic is explicitly linked with the evocation of his name:

I said, "Omeros,"

and *O* was the conch–shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on the lace shore.
(*Omeros*, p. 14.)

In such passages Walcott clearly seeks to collapse the cultural and temporal distance between his Caribbean and Homer's Greece. And in fact, according to Walcott the West Indian topography itself invites "the erasure of the idea of history":

> To me there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean — in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean... There is a continual sense of motion in the Caribbean — caused by the sea and the feeling that one is almost travelling through water and not stationary. The size of time is larger (Hirsch 1986, p. 108).

This sense of flux can also be detected in the vernacular culture of the West Indies. As Louis James points out in *The Islands in Between*, Caribbean dialects significantly tend to "dispense with past and future tense" (pp. 13–4). Already in 'A Letter from Brooklyn' from *In A Green Night*, Walcott played with this aspect of tense, quoting a letter from an old lady:

"I am Mable Rawlins," she writes, "and know both your parents";
He is dead, Mis Rawlins, but God bless your tense:
"Your father was a dutiful, honest,
Faithful, and useful person."
(*Collected Poems*, p. 41.)

Later, in *Another Life*, the poet addressed his own mixed ancestry, gravitating towards Patois so as to break free from a sense of History:

But I tired of your whining, grandfather,
in the whispers of marsh grass,

> I tired of your groans, grandfather,
> in the deep ground bass of the combers.[88]

According to Walcott, this conceptual erasure of linear time marks the emergence of a distinctive Caribbean literature. Recently, he praised Patrick Chamoiseau's Martinican novel *Texaco* in these terms:

> Every island is circumscribed by that oceanic sadness called History, but the *histoires* recorded in *Texaco* are not related to the march, the rhythm, of some optimistic chronology which leads from slavery to emancipation to colonialism to independence, or the demand for it; rather these events are simultaneous, they have only one meaning and one tense... It is this monody that increases the quality of myth in rejecting a linear law and calendar: it is *l'histoire*, not History but the story, the fable, the rumor, as opposed to times, dates and places ('A Letter to Chamoiseau', p. 219).

In his essay from 1974, 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry', Walcott furthermore linked such a rejection of "linear law and calendar" to the Caribbean tradition of the carnival, where "the simultaneity of historical legends, epochs, characters, without historical sequence or propriety is accepted as concept."[89] And this concept also informs *Omeros*, in which the characters appear both as real islanders and mythical figures, local Caribbean fishermen as well as emblematic Homeric presences. Drawing on Homer in this manner, Walcott also continues the tradition of Whitman, Césaire and Perse. As he pointed out in 'The Muse of History', these poets repeated "to the New World...its simultaneity with the Old": "Their vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to the past" (p. 37). This was expressed in Perse's *Seamarks* (1958), for instance, in which "Une méme/ vague pour le monde, une méme vague depuis Troie/ Roule sa hanche jusqu'à nous."[90] However, while this restoration of a link between history and myth is seen by Walcott as the distinguishing feature of a New World literature, it once again reveals the influence of European modernism, as mediated through T. S. Eliot. Ironically, the idea of man being "inhabited by presences" which informs Walcott's a–historical sense of tradition, corresponds closely to what Eliot in 'Tradition

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88 *Collected Poems*, p. 209. As Mervyn Morris has pointed out, the past preterite "I tired" also reads as a vernacular form of the present indicative "I am tired" ('Derek Walcott', in *West Indian Literature* (op. cit.), p. 177).

89 Derek Walcott, 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 16.1, February 1974, pp. 9–10.

90 "One same wave throughout the world, one same wave/ since Troy/ Rolls its haunch towards us." Saint–John Perse, 'Narrow are the Vessels...', *Seamarks*, bilinguial ed., transl. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), pp. 101–3. Similarly, in his title poem from *Sea Grapes*, Walcott wrote: "The ancient war// ...has been the same// since Troy lost its old flame", "the great hexameters come/ to finish up as Caribbean surf." (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 125.) And later, in 'The Bounty': "All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid,/ its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre/ piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed." (*The Bounty*, p. 11.)

and the Individual Talent' called "historical sense": "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence", the compulsion to "write...with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [the poet's] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order".[91]

Discussing *Omeros* and its role as a Homeric epic, Joseph Farrell stresses the importance of seeing Walcott's Homer as a tribal bard who worked within an oral tradition:

> the scholarly discovery of an African epic linked to Homer by virtue of its being the product of an oral–epic performance culture actually parallels one of the dominant conceits of literary apologia in *Omeros* — namely, Walcott's construction of Homer not as a participant in an exclusively European scribal culture but as a singer of folktales whom one might find just as readily in an African or Afro–Caribbean context as in that of archaic Greece.[92]

In fact, already in 'The Muse of History' Walcott had considered the role of the tribal bard:

> In tribal, elemental poetry...the mode is simple, the response open–ended so that each poet can add his lines to the form, a process very much like weaving or the dance, based on the concept that the history of the tribe is endless... There is no beginning but no end. The new poet enters a flux and withdraws (p. 47).

Thus, in *Midsummer* he also remarked that "Homer.../ had the sea's silence for prologue and epilogue" (*Midsummer*, p. 47), lines which pointed towards the open ending of *Omeros*: "When he left the beach the sea was still going on" (*Omeros*, p. 325). In his introduction to Robert Fitzgerald's translation of *The Odyssey*, Seamus Heaney assessed Homer's compositional practices as an oral reciter, pointing for instance to his vast stock of formulaic phrases.[93] And like his exemplar, Walcott can also be seen as a formulaic poet who recycles his own phrases and cadences. For example, 'A Sea–Chantey' from *In a Green Night* evoked "straight–stitching schooners", whose mast are "needles.../ That thread archipelagoes" (*Collected Poems*, p. 44). And later, in 'Origins' (1964), Walcott spoke of "caravels stitching two worlds,/ Like the whirr of my mother's machine in a Sabbath bedroom,/ Like needles of cicadas stitching the afternoon's shroud" (ibid., p. 14). In *Another Life* a "coastal vessel" is "threading the island's jettied villages" (ibid., p.

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91 T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p. 23.

92 Joseph Farrell, 'Classical Epic in a Postmodern World', *The Poetics of Derek Walcott*, p. 254.

93 Seamus Heaney, introduction to *The Odyssey*, Everyman's Library series, transl. Robert Fitzgerald (London: David Campbell publishers, 1992), pp. xvi–xvii.

174), and in 'Reading Machado' from *The Bounty*, the seam of a book is "like a stream stitching its own language" (*The Bounty*, p. 43). Incidentally, this recurrent stitching–imagery seems to epitomise the celebratory, Homeric function of Walcott's voice, reminding us of the etymology of the word "rhapsody": based on the Greek *rhapsõidein*, it literally means "to stitch song together" (*rhaptein*=to stitch, *õide*=song).

But surely, while Walcott admittedly sees Homer as "a singer of folktales", he *also* represents the founding father of the Western literary tradition.Walcott's art bears the distinct trait of having been cultivated on the page, and his formulaic tendencies must be seen as part of his habit of literary borrowings. As Paul Muldoon has noted, "[f]rom the outset, Walcott was an extremely literary poet", elaborating: "There's nothing inherently wrong in that, but many of his poems have a regrettable tendency to proclaim their influences much as some suitcases are covered with stickers."[94] One explanation for this may be that Walcott has come to see himself as a spokesperson, not just for the tribe of Caribbeans, but just as much for the tribe of poetic bards. Resisting the strictures of history, he has made poetry his element, and wishes to assert his affiliations, entering and withdrawing from the "flux" that constitutes his received poetic tradition. Still, this is a precarious balancing act that can back–fire. His own presence, as well as the presence of the world, is occasionally blurred by the dense intertextuality which informs his vision. This is the opening passage of the title poem in *The Bounty*:

> Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true
> Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations
> force a rose from the sand. The thirty–third canto
>
> cores the dawn clouds with concentric radiance,
> the breadfruit opens its palms in praise of the bounty,
> *bois–pain*, tree of bread, slave food, the bliss of John Clare,
>
> torn, wandering Tom, stoat–stroker in his county
> of reeds and stalk–crickets.
>
> (*The Bounty*, p. 3.)

Furthermore, in his capacity as a celebratory poet who writes out of a Caribbean, "Adamic" situation while participating in a scribal tradition, Walcott does not shirk from sounding a pre–twentieth–century note that may strike the reader as somewhat opulent and anachronistic. The concluding piece of 'A Santa Cruz Quartet' from *The Bounty*, for instance, begins:

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[94] Paul Muldoon, review of Walcott's *Collected Poems*, *The Cambridge Review*, March 1987, p. 38. Similar reservations have been made by Ian Sansom in 'Fanfares', his review of *The Bounty* in the *London Review of Books*, 11 December 1997, p. 29.

> After the plague, the city–wall caked with flies, the smoke's
> amnesia,
> learn, wanderer, to go nowhere like the stones...
> (...)
> go where the repetition of the breakers grows easier
> to bear, no father to kill, no citizens to convince.
> (*The Bounty*, p. 78.)

In a lecture from 1990, 'The Poet in the Theatre', Walcott sought to address such scepticism, and linked it to the general state of a late–twentieth–century metropolitan culture. Diagnosing a contemporary distrust in classical Tragedy, he argues that feelings of exuberance and despair, combined with the formality of rhyme and metre, are now seen as

> old–fashioned or exhausted, the argument being that our condition...is one of monodic suffering without meaning, without any pretext to the cathartic, or more pietistically, the sublime... We may have arrived at a point...where despair and its metrically weighed vacuities are the style of our second Elizabethan era; one in which there is an exuberance of emptiness, an enthusiasm for vacuums; where gaps of silence are revered over the articulate.[95]

Walcott continues by examining this in the light of the tensions which persist in a global culture that still thinks concentrically, distinguishing between the metropolis and the periphery:

> It is the vanity of metropolitan cultures to believe that they alone have the right to pessimism, just as they alone once held the rights to their opposites: elation, delight, conviction and faith; while those corners of the world that are beyond the centre...may contain their own primitive exuberance, that is their 'O's of joy or of metrical pain... Exuberance...is permitted only in certain second–rate shapes, such as musicals. There songs can begin with an 'O'... The argument is: give a provincial or backwater joy enough time and it will catch up with metropolitan tragedy.

In his review of *The Bounty*, Ian Sansom admitted as much when trying to explain why Walcott's poetry causes problems among his British readers: "Enthusiam is discouraged in Britain: schoolchildren are taught not to be big–headed and taught to be very careful about using exclamation marks... Everyone now seems to prefer matt to shiny and to distrust sparkle of any kind" ('Fanfares', p. 29).

Already in 1965 Walcott had confronted such metropolitan attitudes, praising Eliot's later works, written after he had become a committedly Christian poet:

> it is [nevertheless] the embittered, doubtful Eliot, the definer of urban despair and of collapsing civilization, of the gasworks inferno, by which his age will be defined, even

[95] Derek Walcott, 'The Poet in the Theatre', a Ronald Duncan Lecture delivered at the South Bank Centre on 29 September 1990, and subsequently published in *Poetry Review*, 80.4, Winter 1990/1991, p. 4.

> if its profound cynicisms now read too elegiac, lyrical and posturing for a generation that has seen more horror than he could imagine, and which likes its poetry raw, blatant and heretical.[96]

As we have already seen, such cultural attitudes also seem to have informed the way in which Walcott has been received by a metropolitan literary establishment. Most recently, one reviewer of *The Bounty* felt inclined to note that when Walcott draws on Dante, it is "unlike the Dante of most European poets...the Dante of the Paradiso".[97] Such responses echo the reservations with which Heaney has been met, as his later works also turn away from Dante of the Purgatory and towards the Paradiso. Similarly, Les Murray's habit of dedicating his books "to the Glory of God", seems to cause some unease among critics. Without making too much of these poets' religious convictions, such poetic practices can also be linked with a general and affirmative trust in the celebratory function of poetry, a trust they have had to rely on as forgers of unsung cultural experiences. Arguably, Walcott's appropriation of a classical, Homeric inheritance reflects not only his poetic ambition to forge the consciousness of his race. It can also be seen as a "mandarin" attempt to reculture a metropolitan centre that has lost its faith in the power of the word, and resorted instead to a literature of despair and silence. Similarly, as we shall see in the following chapters, both Les Murray and Tony Harrison have turned to pre–twentieth–century traditions, as part of their response to a metropolitan poetic culture. In Murray's case, the ambition has been to introduce a democratic poetic voice that was ousted by the apparent intellectual élitism of the modernist age. And like Walcott, Tony Harrison has turned to a classical heritage, affirming his belief in the cathartic powers of the metrically measured voice. This in turn has helped him to create a medium by which he could face the atrocities of his age, as well as redress the voicelessness of his indigenous culture.

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96 Derek Walcott, 'T. S. Eliot — Master of an Age', p. 3.

97 Harry Clifton, 'Luxe, Calme et Volupté', review of *The Bounty*, *Poetry Review*, 87.3, Autumn 1997, p. 52.

3

Les Murray: The Peasant Mandarin

Les Murray's position as a self–proclaimed "Peasant Mandarin" represents an act of resistance to a post–Empire metropolitan culture. In this way, it should also be seen as a reaction against the emergence of 'Australian Literature' as an academic subject, administered — and arguably censored — by Australian universities since the 1950s. Beginning with a discussion of the literary climate in post–war Australia, this chapter examines the gradual institutionalisation of a national poetry, and considers how this affected its further development. As I will point out, during the the 1950s the call was generally for a literature that was more intellectual and cosmopolitan, reflecting a modern and increasingly urbanised Australia. In this way, previous concerns with the Bush and with Australian nationalism tended to be discarded as provincial and outdated. This also linked with the growing cultural influence coming from America, leading in the 1960s to the emergence of a more experimental, 'new' poetry, whose practitioners sought to react against the conservatively Anglocentric climate promoted by the universities. Discussing Murray in this context, I intend to explore how his position as a "Peasant Mandarin" was in part triggered by the cultural élitism of an academic–led establishment, but also inspired by his discovery at Sydney University of various "marginal" literatures. As I will illustrate, Alexander Carmichael's collection of Gaelic folk poetry, *Carmina Gadelica*, together with translations of Aboriginal song texts, played a crucial part in the poet's shaping of a Boeotian poetry. Drawing on such material, he has managed to create a celebratory, communal voice which is at once intimately linked with his regional experience, but at the same time immensely cosmopolitan. Focusing on Murray's later works, including his verse novel *Fredy Neptune*, I will then consider Murray's cultural role as a "Peasant Mandarin" in an international context.

In an essay from 1971, Judith Wright set out to discuss the developments of Australian poetry since the 1940s, and began by noting that "the distance of Australian poets from the high seats of culture and critical appraisal" could be seen as "the chief factor both in our remaining stylistically imitative, and also in our achieving whatever we may have achieved of provincial originality."[1] What she was primarily referring to, of

[1] Judith Wright, 'Australian Poetry Since 1941', *Southerly*, 31.1, 1971, p. 19. (Hereafter cited as 'Wright 1971'.)

course, was the fact that, the English–language literature of Australia originally evolved out of a British cultural inheritance, and that historically, Australia had been turning its gaze towards Europe for its cultural centre. Moulded from a European mode of thinking and writing, a lot of the early poetry betrayed a profound sense of displacement, an inability to come to terms with the landscapes, climate and fauna of the 'new' continent. But implicit in Wright's assessment is also the notion that being detached from a high cultural establishment — not only in Britain, but also in Australia — the early poets had the freedom and scope to work towards a distinct tradition. This also lies behind Les Murray's rehabilitation of the nineteenth–century Bush balladeers and newspaper versifiers, whom he sees as "an important part of our literary heritage".[2] Mainly published in newspapers "and likely to be read by high and low alike" (ibid., p. 224), their works, he argues, constitute a vigorous, democratic alternative to the "thin crop" of "high–art poetry of Australia's first hundred years" (p. 222).

But as Murray also notes, with the emergence in the early 1920s of Norman Lindsay's Vision group, followed by poets like Kenneth Slessor and R. D. FitzGerald, attention was turned to the prospect of an emerging high–art tradition. As a result, "the vernacular schools of Australian verse would increasingly be lumped together and dismissed as anachronistic bush balladeers, droning on futilely in outback pubs and shearers' quarters" (ibid., p. 223). These tendencies continued into the 1940s, which became a particularly flourishing time for Australian poetry. By then, already–established names like Slessor, FitzGerald and Douglas Stewart were joined by a younger generation of poets, including Francis Webb, James McAuley and Judith Wright. According to Wright, the strengthening of the literary climate during this decade also had something to do with the changes brought about by the war. After the British military failure at Singapore, American troops rushed to the region, using Australia as a strategic base for their operations. All of this led to a new cultural stimulus: among the American troops and airmen were writers and poets, who

> showed a surprising and flattering interest in what was going on, culturally, in Australia, and bought up our small editions of locally–printed novels and poetry, apparently not just as native curios but out of a sincere desire to know what we were doing (Wright 1971, pp. 19–20).

According to Judith Wright, in 1939 a total of 26 books had been published in Australia. In 1944, despite the wartime, this figure had risen to 54, out of which 26 were

[2] Les Murray, 'The Narrow–Columned Middle Ground', *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p. 250.

books of poetry.[3] In addition, the 1940s saw the emergence of several literary journals, such as the *Meanjin Papers*[4] and *Southerly*. Launched in 1939 by the Sydney branch of the English Association, *Southerly* had in its early years focused primarily on English and American literature. But in 1944, when the publishing house Angus & Robertson became involved in its production, it slowly began to gravitate towards Australian writing.[5] Generally, Angus & Robertson came to play an important role in the development of the literary climate. In 1941, for example, they instigated *Australian Poetry*, a series of anthologies which appeared annually until 1973. From the outset, the idea behind the series was to invite a leading writer or critic to make his or her personal choice of poetry that had come out of Australia that year. In this way, Douglas Stewart edited the first volume, followed by people like Robert FitzGerald (1942), Kenneth Slessor (1945) and Judith Wright (1948).

Looking at the poetry coming out of the 1940s, we are confronted by a rather diversified picture. The literary climate of this decade was marked by the emergence of several movements, whose artistic differences were to a varying degree linked with their political outlook. By the time the war broke out, there had already been signs of growing nationalist tendencies in Australia, essentially a revival of the nationalist radicalism which had first found a unified voice in the *Bulletin* bards of the 1890s. This coincided with certain poetic developments pointing towards an acceptance of Australia as the centre of the Australian experience. Most significantly, in 1938 Rex Ingamells founded the Jindyworobaks, a loosely associated group that sought to appropriate a received poetic language to the Australian environment, while being openly inspired by Aboriginal culture. But although they persisted until 1953, publishing their work in annual anthologies, the Jindyworobaks failed to make a strong impact as a movement. This was partly due to a general lack of talent, and partly to the hostility with which they were met by other practitioners, most notably by such traditionalists as A. D. Hope.[6] But if these traditionalists attacked the Jindyworobaks' version of Australia, they were on the other hand equally opposed to the imported avant–garde experimentations of the Angry

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3 Wright quotes these figures in her essay, referring to G. Johnston's *Annals of Australian Literature* (Wright 1971, p. 20).

4 The *Meanjin Papers* were founded in Brisbane in 1940. Over the years, the journal has altered its name several times. In 1947, it was changed to *Meanjin*, followed by *Meanjin Quarterly* (1961–1976), after which it became *Meanjin* again. To avoid confusion, I will subsequently refer to it merely as *Meanjin*.

5 Eventually, in 1956, *Southerly* began to call itself *A Review of Australian Literature*.

6 For an illuminating discussion of the Jindyworobaks, see Bruce Clunies Ross, 'Survival of the Jindyworobaks', *Kunapipi*, III.1, 1981, pp. 56–63.

Penguins. In 1943, the two young poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart concocted a number of poems resembling the works of the Penguins, and sent them off to the group's magazine under the fictitious name of Ern Malley. When the poems were published, McAuley and Stewart soon stepped forward to reveal the hoax, and so also to disclose the Penguins' conception of art as fraudulent. This led not only to the dissolution of the group in 1946, but also generated a widespread suspicion towards modernist experimentations in Australian poetry.[7]

In his brief survey from 1963, *Australian Literature 1950–1962*, A. D. Hope assessed the developments in post–war Australian poetry, and noted: "one gets an impression of a growing sense of style, a greater skill in handling poetic forms and a more professional attitude to the craft than the country has known before."[8] According to Hope, this was partly owing to a rise in literary criticism. Back in the 1930s, he pointed out,

> [m]ost reviewing was done by journalists for their daily papers and on the whole was scrappy and perfunctory. Today there is a number of well established literary journals...while the daily and weekly papers give considerable space to reviews of Australian books and often seek out professional critics to write them (p. 3).

By the 1950s, *Southerly* and *Meanjin* had already established themselves as highly influential literary journals, and soon several other periodicals began to appear. The Poetry Society of Australia was founded in Sydney in 1954 to encourage the study of poetry. It arranged readings, lectures and poetry competitions, and also launched the magazine *Prism*. The same year *Overland* started publication in Melbourne, and was from the beginning associated with left–wing politics, carrying as its slogan: "Temper, democratic; bias Australian". Although not a literary journal as such, it did carry literary articles in its pages. Furthermore, in 1956 *Westerly* and *Quadrant* emerged. While *Westerly* did not adopt any particular ideology or editorial line, *Quadrant* was perceptibly right–wing and received sponsorship from the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom. Edited by James McAuley, its line on literature was traditionalist, questioning an egalitarian Australian ethos as the basis for a literary tradition.[9]

All of these developments must also be seen in the light of the growing impact of

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[7] See for instance Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993). John Tranter has also commented on how the "unfortunate backlash from the "Ern Malley" affair resulted in nearly twenty years of caution on the part of editors and publishers", in his essay 'Australian Poetry 1940–1980: A Personal View', *Poetry*, CLXIX.1, October–November 1996, p. 89. (Hereafter cited as 'Tranter 1996'.)

[8] A. D. Hope, *Australian Literature 1950–1962* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press/ London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 6. (Hereafter cited as 'Hope 1963'.)

[9] I am indebted to the general discussion of Australian literary journals in Brian Kiernan's *Australisn Writers And Their Work: Criticism* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1974).

education in the post–war era. Already in 1940, E. Morris Miller had argued that "the growth in worth of content in our literature since the 'eighties...is due in no small measure to the vivifying impact of the Universities".[10] Twenty–three years later, A. D. Hope spoke along the same lines, giving these figures: "In 1939 there were six universities in the country, now there are ten and there are plans for at least five more in the next ten years. The number of students in the same period has risen from under fifteen thousand to nearly fifty thousand" (Hope 1963, pp. 1–2). As he pointed out, not only did this give rise to the number of educated writers, but just as importantly to the number of educated *readers* in Australia: "For the first time in its history Australian society has a literate 'class' to whom writers can address themselves" (p. 2). Evidently, this change in the cultural climate affected the writing of poetry in many respects. In 1940 Morris Miller had felt that despite the "vivifying impact" of the universities, Australian writing was "not redolent of the university or the cloistered air characteristic of some English men of letters" (op. cit., p. 17). But by 1951 H. M. Green identified the emergence of a number of "intellectual poets".[11] And in 1963 Hope said with reference to Green's observation twelve years earlier:

> There were few enough of them at the time for this to seem an apt enough description, and to single them out from the general pattern of Australian verse. Now the pattern is reversed and no one would think of distinguishing these poets as intellectual, for their interests, their subjects and their treatments seem no more than what one would normally expect of competent poets (Hope 1963, p. 8).

In fact, together with James McAuley, Hope himself played a prominent role in the group of so–called "university poets" who came to the fore during the 1950s. So much so that when Harry Heseltine summarised the decade in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* (1972), he said: "a long–range observer might well have been pardoned for believing that our literary landscape was dominated by a strange two–headed beast rampaging under the protection of the academy, carrying the banner of 'classicism', and bearing the name of Hope–and–McAuley."[12]

In this way — to borrow Judith Wright's phrase — it seems that "the distance of Australian poets from the high seats of culture and critical appraisal" was gradually

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10 E. Morris Miller, 'The Relation of English and Australian Literature', from his *Australian Literature 1810–1938*, reprinted in *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticsm*, ed. Clement Semmler (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.14.

11 H. M. Green, *Australian Literature — 1900–1950* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press/ London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 4.

12 *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, ed. Harry Heseltine (Sydney: Penguin, 1972), Introduction, p. 50.

diminished in the post–war period. Already in 1945, *Meanjin* had moved its base from Brisbane to the University of Melbourne, from which it also began to receive funding in 1949. But one of the paradoxes of this gradual institutionalisation of Australian poetry was that the universities were conservatively Anglocentric in their set–up. As Leigh Dale points out in a recent survey of the university teaching of English in Australia, higher education had originally been introduced to serve "the civilizing mission of English Imperialism".[13] Furthermore, Andrew Milner has shown that the appointments of English teachers to Australian universities in the post–war years reflected a continuation of this commitment: with few exceptions, teaching staffs had optained their qualifications at British universities, if they were not in fact British nationals.[14] Indeed, on all levels Australian education had largely remained true to the British model. In 'Australian Poetry Since 1941', Judith Wright commented on "the English Romantic influence, which was perpetuated through our education system in almost complete exclusion of any other nation's poetry" (p. 22). And although she noted that the Australian poets of her generation had "put this tradition to good use", attempting "to transform a queer end–of–the–earth landscape into something symbolically functional", there had been few signs of incorporating Australian texts into the curriculum.

A few attempts had been made, though, to encourage such developments. In 1940, the Commonwealth Literary Fund had begun to make grants available to the universities for lectures on Australian literature. In the same year Brian Elliott was appointed as Lecturer in Australian Literature at Adelaide University, and subsequently, "at least ten lectures a year" were incorporated "as an introduction to Australian literature" in the first year course in English.[15] While it is important to acknowledge such early initiatives, they did little to change the overall picture. Bruce Clunies Ross, who went to Adelaide in the late 1950s, remembers that "through complacency and compliance with the prevailing fashions in culture," he "failed to benefit from the courses in Australian literature".[16] Clearly, "compliance with the prevailing fashions in culture" provided a major stumbling block for the early development of Australian literary studies. As a university subject, Australian literature tended to be considered an appendix to the English canon.

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13 Leigh Dale, 'Whose English — Who's English? Teaching Literature in Australia', *Meanjin*, 51.2, Winter 1992, p. 396.

14 Andrew Milner, 'The "English" Ideology: Literary Criticism in England and Australia', *Thesis Eleven*, 12, 1985, pp. 110–29.

15 A. Norman Jeffares, 'Australian Literature and the Universities', *Meanjin*, 3, spring 1954, pp. 432–3.

16 Bruce Clunies Ross, 'Survival of the Jindyworobaks', p. 56.

In three issues from 1954, *Meanjin* conducted a symposium on 'Australian Literature and the Universities', with contributions from A. D. Hope, A. G. Mitchell, Norman Jeffares, E. Morris Miller, and Vance Palmer.[17] At the core of this debate was a feeling that "Australian literature is not good enough or...not well enough establised as a separate branch of literature, or again, that there is not yet enough of it to justify it having a course to itself".[18] This seemed to be the main challenge facing Hope and his fellow advocates. Nevertheless, Hope maintained that study of Australian literature should not be part of a broader English course:

> In the maintenance of the cultural tradition the study of English literature may have claims immensely superior to those of Australian literature. But it would be foolish to ignore the fact that our native literature has something important to contribute in the very fact that it is *native* (p. 167).

In this way, the contributors to the *Meanjin* symposium were generally concerned with the possibility of linking Australian literature up with the study of history and culture. And in 1959 the University of Melbourne introduced the first Honours course in Australian Literature and Cultural History. In this connection, Vincent Buckley — newly appointed at the university — addressed the issues broached five years earlier in *Meanjin*:

> while I agree that Australian literature as a body can't make good a claim to be considered, as English literature is considered, as a relatively self–contained body and tradition which demands a special critical response and a separate literary history, I can't get very enthusiastic over the sociological approach either. It seems reductive rather than expansive.[19]

What Buckley touched upon here was the central problem of establishing a scholarly foundation for the study of Australian literature. Warning against the dangers of making Australian literature "an adjunct of Australian history...or sociology" (ibid.), he focused on the role of literary criticism, hoping the teaching of literature would help to create "a clear space in which our young writers and critics may write better, because they see themselves, their 'tradition', and their environment more clearly."[20] During the 1920s and 1930s the first sketchy attempts at literary histories had been made, as in Percival Serle's *Bibliography of Australian Poetry and Verse* (1925), H. M. Green's *An Outline of*

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17 A. D. Hope, A. G. Mitchell, Norman Jeffares, E. Morris Miller & Vance Palmer, 'Australian Literature and the Universities', *Meanjin*, 2, 3 & 4, 1954.

18 A. D. Hope, ibid., *Meanjin*, 2, 1954, p. 166.

19 Vincent Buckley, 'Towards an Australian Literature', printed in *Meanjin*, 1, 1959; reprinted in *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism* (op. cit.), p. 84.

20 Ibid.., p. 85.

Australian Literature (1935), and E. Morris Miller's *Australian Literature 1810–1938* (1940). But with the plans for developing Australian literature as a university subject, the call was for a more systematic body of criticism.

Generally, this debate seemed to repeat issues which had marked the nineteenth–century development of English Literature as a university subject in Britain, as well as the early–twentieth–century debate in Scotland about the position of Scottish literature in the academy.[21] Moreover, Hope's and Buckley's concern that Australian writing needed the stimulus of literary criticism reflected an intellectual climate not dissimilar to that of the West Indies. In hindsight, although the appeal for such a stimulus is understandable, it was however also problematic. While a critical, scholarly evaluation was sought in both Australia and the West Indies so as to nourish the further development of a national literature, its implementation also threatened to perpetuate links with a dominant English tradition. As Leigh Dale observes in connection with the situation in Australia: "Literary criticism may seek to recuperate or validate the national, but its discourses are firmly sited within educational institutions. Imperialist discourses have dominated literary education in Australian universities for so long that their assumptions, strategies and outcomes have become normative".[22] Thus, it has also been said in connection with Buckley's scholarship that "he...represent[s] the influence of F. R. Leavis on the English departments of some Australian universities after the Second World War."[23] Indeed, Buckley's first book of criticism, *Essays in Poetry — Mainly Australian* (1957), was an attempt to reassess "the conception...which the various outback schools have managed to foist on our editors as 'The Australian Tradition'."[24] Well aware that "[s]ome readers...may think me too harsh, too critical of a literature which is still in bud", he nevertheless defended what he saw as his own scholarly objectivity: "One castigates where one's emotions are most deeply engaged. And more than this: one must not let one's hopes be founded on an unrealistic or irrational assessment of the possibilities" (p. ix).

In this way, with the universities' gradual institutionalisation of the literary climate in Australia, there was a tendency to dismiss previous perceptions of what distinguished

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21 See for instance the final chapter in *The Scottish Invention of English Literature*, ed. Robert Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

22 Leigh Dale, 'Whose English — Who's English?', p. 394.

23 Brian Kiernan, *Australian Writers and Their Work: Criticism*, p. 44. It should be noted that Buckley had in fact studied at Cambridge while Leavis was teaching there.

24 Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry — Mainly Australian* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1957), p. 22.

an emerging tradition. Nationalist sentiments and notions of the Outback were generally seen as outdated. This was also linked with the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of Australia in the post–war period, something that in turn reflected a diminishing sense of cultural insularity. In this connection Judith Wright notes:

> we began to dismiss the image of the explorer, the bushranger, the whole outbackery. Since the search for identity had involved much coming to terms with Australian nature and landscape, this too seemed out of date. The cry was for a new "city" poetry, to fit our new ideas of ourselves (Wright 1971, p. 22).

Obviously, some were more critical of these trends than others. Reviewing Angus & Robertson's 1961 edition of *Australian Poetry* for the *London Magazine* in 1962, Val Vallis spoke of "a difficult and transitional time for Australian poetry":

> The poetic tradition...is now shifting to a poetry of self–elucidation that seems to repudiate nationalism and tradition as ways to understanding — a 'citizen of the world art'.
>
> One major dislocation in the Australian publishing scene helped in this stage of poetic progress. The most famous traditional outlet for poetry publication since 1880, *The Bulletin*, was taken over by a lesser paper which, significantly enough, called itself *The Observer*. The academic poets, the theological poets, whose universals and gods were, as they thought, untainted by nationalism, now called the tunes for the younger poets to play.[25]

By 1963, Hope announced that "the old self–consciousness about being Australian in subject and idiom has almost completely disappeared. The poets are no less interested in the scene in which they live, but they appear to take it for granted" (Hope 1963, p. 4). But while Hope had contributed to this development and helped to set the tone for a new generation, the younger poets of the 1960s furthermore saw the need to react against an Anglocentric cultural climate, to "develop a new poetics appropriate to the age."[26] During this decade, the general disparagement of a British–oriented tradition coincided with a growing awareness of new American poetry. By the mid–1960s two important anthologies arrived in Australia, namely Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960) and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962). According to John Tranter their effect was incalculable, as "they showed the local writers that there was a real and vigorous alternative to the world of Henry Lawson and A. D. Hope" (Tranter 1979, p. xvii). This "vigorous alternative" was typically found in the works of Charles Olsen and the Black Mountain poets, as well as New York poets like Frank O'Hara and John

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25 Val Vallis, review of *Australian Poetry 1961*, *London Magazine*, 2.6, September 1962, p. 79.

26 *The New Australian Poetry*, ed. John Tranter (St. Lucia, Qld.: Makar Press, 1979), Introduction, p. xvii. (This introduction hereafter cited as 'Tranter 1979'.)

Ashbery, who drew on Wallace Stevens's notion of poetry as "the supreme fiction". Consequently, the younger Australian poets also showed a growing concern with poetry as process, as word–play.

The "new poetics", however, was not merely a reaction against "the handcuffs of rhyme and the critical strictures of the university English departments"; it was also seen as "an integral part of a wider struggle for freedom" (Tranter 1979, p. xvii). As in the United States, the younger generation of writers in Australia took a strong opposition to their country's engagement in Vietnam. To a large extent, poetry became part of that wider, anti–authoritarian protest culture to which rock–music and drugs also belonged. And also in this climate, questions of an Australian national identity were generally brushed aside in favour of international concerns. In 1968, echoing Hope, Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott stated in their anthology *New Impulses in Australian Poetry*: "Now that a genuine unity of population is taken for granted, poets are concerned with promoting an awareness of disunity, of alienation, in order to facilitate truth to their own personal vision, a vision drawing upon the wider context of world affairs."[27]

It was during this cultural ferment that Les Murray began to find his feet as a poet. In 1957, he left his native region of rural Bunyah in New South Wales to study English, German and Psychology at the University of Sydney. At this stage he had already familiarised himself with the work of a previous generation of Australian poets, such as R. D. FitzGerald, Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright. And this, according to himself, had "planted a seed in my mind".[28] However, when asked by the present author about the literary interests being nurtured at Sydney, he said:

> There was no interest being nurtured at the university. At least, there was no interest that we were aware of. We never heard that people were trying to get Australian literature up as a subject, because the academics never communicated with the students in those days, especially not in the English Department.[29]

On several occasions, Murray has also testified to the pervasively Anglocentric atmosphere of the university. In his sequence of sonnets 'Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato', whose title comes from the motto of Sydney University, and means "the same mind under different stars", he notes:

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27 *New Impulses in Australian Poetry*, eds. Rodney Hall & Thomas Shapcott (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Qld Press, 1968), Introduction, p. 5. (This introduction hereafter cited as 'Hall & Shapcott'.)

28 Les Murray, interview with Graeme Kinross Smith, "...The Frequent Image of Farms' — A Profile of Les Murray', *Westerly*, 3, September 1980, p. 41. (Hereafter cited as 'Kinross Smith'.)

29 Personal interview with Les Murray, conducted in Oxford on 8 April 1997. (Hereafter cited as 'Personal Interview'.)

> Literate Australia was British, or babu at least,
> before Vietnam and the American conquest
> career had overwhelmed learning most deeply back then:
> a major in English made one a minor Englishman.[30]

A glance at the university calendar from 1957 confirms the university's strong commitment to a European, and predominantly British, cultural heritage. It states: "Lecturers in English will assume a knowledge of the History of Western Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire."[31] The First Year Course for English students consists of a Language as well as a Literature section. The first includes grammar, phonetics ("English pronunciation with special reference to Australian conditions and problems" — the cultural bias of this last phrase is in itself revealing) and a historical survey of the development of the language (ibid., p. 708). The Literature section covers an almost exclusively British range of poetry, novels and drama.[32] Australian writing is only mentioned in the Third Year Course: out of a total of 80 Lectures spanning the Victorian to the Modern period, five have been set aside for Australian Literature.[33] When asked about the English course in general, Murray recalls: "I tended to regard all writers set on the course as belonging to the enemy. I have still never read Shelley because he was the enemy's right arm" (Personal Interview). Still, this sense of resistance was not towards English literature as such, but rather towards a type of Anglocentrism nurtured within an Australian cultural context. In a joint interview with Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky from 1989, Murray pointed out: "I never quite mistook the English for my enemy, my real enemy was something that referred to them and drew its authority from them. It was a kind of aristocracy in the light of which the rest of us were to be relegated."[34] Elsewhere, he admits that the university course opened his eyes to some of the early English texts: "One...that the English Department didn't cauterize was Chaucer...I liked the literature before him, too, Old English and Middle English."[35]

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30 Les Murray, 'Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato', *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 112. (Subsequent quotations from Murray's poetry will be from this work, unless otherwise stated.)

31 *Calendar for the University of Sydney for the Year 1957* (Sydney: A. H. Pettifer, Government Printer, 1957), p. 707.

32 Ibid., p. 708. The prescribed text for the poetry section is *The Albatross Book of Living Verse*, published by Collins; 'The Novel' includes texts ranging from Fielding to E.M. Forster; and 'Drama' spans Marlowe and T. S. Eliot.

33 Ibid., p. 710. The prescribed texts are not specified.

34 Les Murray speaking in 'Poets' Round Table — 'A Common Language'', *PN Review*, 15.4, 1989, p. 44.

35 Les Murray, interview with Iain Sharp, *Landfall*, 42.2, June 1988, pp. 164–5. (Hereafter cited as 'Sharp'.)

As to his early literary aspirations, Murray says: "I had to arrange the space to exist, in which I could use the language I grew up speaking, and my own references and my own kind of background" (Personal Interview). Consequently, he spent most of his time as a student in the Fisher Library, studying a lot of works that were outside the received canon: "I went for everything marginal in the world, and reading everything else left me with an enormously larger curriculum in my head" (ibid.). In his essay from 1976, 'The Australian Republic', Murray also points out with reference to his own university experience:

> It has never been possible to get a distinctive Australian education through institutional channels. You must either give yourself one, or be taught by your elders in a more or less informal way... The most comfortable way to educate oneself is to do it at a university; the library there tends to be better stocked than that famous and perhaps mythical one in the cells of Borroloola lock–up, which is said to have educated a generation of Queensland and Territory wanderers. I used and resisted my university in this way, though I don't claim much credit for it: it was an instinctive and precarious balancing act which I didn't really understand at the time...All I knew was that if ever I snubbed or denied my fellow country people, those who hadn't had the education I was getting, I would be lost (*The Paperbark Tree*, pp. 49–50).

Later, Murray has commented: "I have always been one to look around and find what's accepted and fashionable, and not particularly obey it. I always go for the marginal and unfashionable" (Personal Interview). Such an habitual defence of the unfashionable has clearly from the start been provoked by an intellectual climate which, in the course of its own development, had produced narrowing, exclusivist conceptions of what an Australian literature should look like. In part, Murray objects to the dismissal of earlier generations of writers by a twentieth–century high–art literati. But behind his critique is also an awareness that the old bonds with a wider reading public were gradually disappearing. As noted already, a large proportion of the poetry being written in Australia during the first one hundred years had taken the form of popular verses, appearing in daily papers and journals aimed at a broad, non–literary audience. But with the growth during the 1940s and 1950s of a largely city–based, academic literary establishment, and the concomitant appearance of specialised literary journals, poetry began to shift away from the public sphere. Thus, in his anthology *Fivefathers*, Murray also refers to the 1930s—1950s as "a Golden Age in Australian poetry which paradoxically coincided with its greatest marginalisation".[36]

This is at the core of Murray's life–long scepticism towards the impact of the

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36 Les Murray (ed.), *Fivefathers: Five Australian Poets of the pre–Academic Era* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), p. 11.

universities on Australian literature. As he notes: "When the universities finally did take up Australian poetry, we thought that they would be our patrons, that they would look after us. But the prices were very high and the rewards ambiguous and meagre" (Personal Interview). Partaking in a conference on 'Writers and Academics' in 1988 — held at the University of New South Wales — Murray delivered one of his most pungent attacks, entitled 'The Suspect Captivity of the Fisher King'. Reading as a series of aphoristic statements, the essay warns against a "wholesale repudiation of the 'common reader'", which has followed in the wake of the universities' institutionalisation of poetry (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 329). Furthermore, drawing attention to the constraints which an academic–led critical climate may impose upon a literature, he argues that:

> It is the special glory of academics not to set or follow fashion, but to counteract it on behalf of texts which it injures or obscures. They exist to keep the unread read, and to defend its real qualities. For a literary academic to treat any author as bygone is a betrayal of trust (ibid., p. 330).

In addition to the conservatively Anglocentric climate at Sydney University, Murray describes his encounter with a growing metropolitan culture as an immense cultural shock. Speaking to Carol Oles, he recalls:

> I came to Sydney about the same time as critics began saying insistently that Australia should become an urban culture. Literature now had to follow the facts of demography: since most Australians lived in the cities, the literature should be about cities; the outback image had to be dismissed to the past as an irrelevance. Well I came with a head full of knowledge about the bush, and my timing was off.[37]

Clive James, who was Murray's contemporary at Sydney, also speaks of a student milieu that gravitated towards the poetic influences coming from overseas:

> With the conspicuous exception of Murray...few of the [university] poets had the heritage of Australian poetry much on their minds. My own *Stammtisch* would be decorated with slim Faber volumes...Auden, MacNeice, T. S. Eliot and Pound's *Cantos*... Home–grown literary magazines like *Meanjin* and *Westerly* were for old lecturers in gowns who cared about Vance Palmer and were sincerely, absurdly, bent on setting up a Department of Australian Literature.[38]

While the interests nourished among his contemporaries in the 1960s were also in part a reaction against the oppressively Anglocentric intellectual culture of the universities, Murray soon saw the new poetics as a different strain of authoritarianism which threatened to take over the old one. This is not to say that he did not familiarise himself

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37 Les Murray, interview with Carol Oles, *The American Poetry Review*, 15.2, March–April 1986, p. 29. (Hereafter cited as 'Oles'.)

38 Clive James, 'The Handing on of a Copious View', the *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 1996, p.8.

with American poetry. But while others typically explored the post–war works of Ashbery, O'Hara and Charles Olson, Murray turned instead to earlier exemplars like Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers and Robert Frost.[39]

According to Murray, as studies in Australian literature were further developed during the 1960s, a battle erupted in the universities, a battle "between the British model and the Californian model":

> Suddenly there was a political test on your reception by the universities. Gradually most of the English departments were taken over by one particular kind of poetry which called itself left–wing, using a sort of Marxist jargon, but often without believing it or acting upon it. You *must* defy them I think, particularly if they're well–educated, because their intention is to take the power out of poetry and transfer it to the universities. So I have been in a curious kind of uncomfortable warfare with a lot of the academia ever since, partly made more painful by being a war against friends (Personal Interview).

In his recent collection of poetry, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, Murray describes the 1960s as a time when "being accredited as a poet/ meant signing things against Vietnam./ For scorn of the bargain I wouldn't do it." Similarly, in the universities "there was line on Vietnam": "When a tutor/ in politics failed all who crossed that, and wasn't/ dismissed, scholarship was back to holy writ."[40] In 1965, Murray made his first trip to Europe, representing Australia at a Commonwealth Literary Festival in Wales together with James McAuley. And there he experienced similar cultural changes to those at home:

> I don't think I was particularly heard at that occasion. Even the English weren't. The only people that got heard was one group of dissenters from the regular canon. I thought what was happening was that I was watching a parallel Palace revolution (Personal Interview).

Later, in his poem 'The Cardiff Commonwealth Arts Festival Poetry Conference 1965, Recalled', Murray wrote: "Uptown, the Bomb Culture's just opened/ its European run,/ discounting many things on its counter:/ calm tradition is one" (*Collected Poems*, p. 139).

In hindsight, then, Murray's inclusion in several of the "new writing" anthologies which appeared during the late 1960s and early 1970s seems strange. For instance, in *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* (which included three poems by Murray), Hall and Shapcott identified as one of the new impulses in Australian poetry, a deflation of

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39 See Oles, p. 32. Elsewhere Murray lists James Dickey as another, more contemporary poet whom he read during the 1960s, and recalls: "Dickey...was kind of driven out of American literature, because he came out for the American involvement in Vietnam" (Personal Interview).

40 Les Murray, 'Memories of the Height–to–Weight Ratio', *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 36.

"tendencies toward the bardic apostrophy, which was becoming widespread ten years ago" (Hall & Shapcott, p. 8). Again, notions of community and national identity were discarded in favour of a poetic outlook which centered on the individual, and the existential ague of the modern condition. Within such a thematic framework it is rather odd to find a poem like Murray's 'The Burning Truck', which above all expresses a strong communal awareness:

> And all of us who knew our place and prayers
> clutched our verandah–rails and window–sills,
> begging that truck between our teeth to halt,
> keep on going, vanish, strike...but set us free.
> And then we saw the wild boys of the street
> go running after it...
> (*Collected Poems*, pp. 3–4.)

Asked about his inclusion in some of these anthologies, Murray now says: "I was being recruited, I suppose, in a loose, sloppy kind of way, but as I began to become critical, it changed. I started being left out of them" (Personal Interview).

In 1966, Murray was asked to edit an issue of *Poetry Australia* devoted to poetry from the Canberra–Monaro region. In his editorial note, he reveals his disinclination to take part in any of the groupings that marked the literary climate of the period: "The editor of the present small collection of verse written by people in the Canberra–Monaro region...regrets that he is unable to discuss trends or schools or streams of influence because, through no great fault of his own, his mind simply doesn't work that way."[41] The editorial also conveys Murray's preference for a literature that acknowledges the Australian landscape rather than embracing indiscriminately a growing urban culture:

> From the editor's probably unpopular point of view, the great advantage of living in the Monaro country...is the sheer beauty of the surrounding countryside, and its nearness. In Canberra itself, it is possible to have a mountain at the end of one's street. On the other hand, of course, poets who want to say something about the high, vast beauty of this landscape have to be wary of unfavourable comparison with David Campbell, who has written so much about it with such consumate skill (ibid.).

That Murray should mention David Campbell as an exemplar just goes to show his early allegiance with a senior generation of poets, whose works drew heavily on the Australian landscape.[42] Reading his editorial from *Poetry Australia*, it becomes clear that Murray at least did not take his nationality for granted:

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41 Les Murray, editorial note, *Poetry Australia*, 2.8, 1966, p. 4.

42 Some of these poets were later gathered in *Fivefathers*, which comprises a highly personal selection of the works of Kenneth Slessor, Roland Robinson, David Campbell, James McAuley and Francis Webb.

> Another possible source of poetry in Canberra...is the vivid contrasts created by this city in its efforts to be both Australian and something else — "the bourgeois dream of an ideal Britain superimposed on sheep paddocks", as a friend once put it. The artificial and the real...the spectacle of snow gums being hacked down to make way for birch and oak and flowering plum — these things involve valuable tensions.

Incidentally, Murray would later explore these tensions himself in 'The Canberra Remnant', where "dark houses" sleep "beneath the freez–/ ing drip of Europ–/ ean trees" (*Collected Poems*, p. 37), and 'The Canberra Suburbs' Infinite Extension': "Shall I scorn to plant a dahlia/ in the soil of White Australia?" (ibid., p. 96).

Reading "everything marginal in the world" in the Fisher Library as a student had helped Murray to arrange the space he needed as an Australian poet with a strong rural background, and eventually paved the way for his self–appointed role as a "Peasant Mandarin". It was at this formative stage that he began to construct for himself an alternative tradition that pointed back to a classical heritage, and which counter–balanced a twentieth–century literary culture where poetry had become the commodity of an intellectual élite. The contours of this alternative tradition were later drawn up in 'On Sitting Back and Thinking About Porter's Boeotia', in which Murray spoke of "two contrasting models of civilization between which Western man has vacillated" (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 57). Essentially, the essay describes a universal struggle between a metropolitan "Athenian" tradition, and a relegated provincial culture of "Boeotia". Athens epitomises "the urbanizing, fashion–conscious priniciple removed from and usually insensitive to natural, cyclic views of the world" (ibid.), which Murray in turn ascribes to a Boeotian heritage. "Boeotia, in her perennial incarnations, replaces theatre with dance or pageant...clings to older ideas of the importance of family and the display of individual human quality under stress", Murray asserts, before suggesting: "it may be that poetry...is ultimately a Boeotian art" (p. 58).

In this way, posing as a "Peasant", or "provincial" (both in a national and a cosmopolitan context), Murray reclaims a classical poetic heritage in a manner very similar to Heaney, Walcott and Harrison. Speaking in this essay of the classical poets, Murray argues how Virgil "worked his way...backwards...[from an] Athenian style...to the pure Boeotian mode of his *Georgics*" (p. 59). Murray's first volume of poetry, published jointly with Geoffrey Lehmann in 1965,[43] also acknowledged the example of Virgil. Its title, *The Ilex Tree*, was an open reference to the oak tree in the *Georgics*, under which two bards challenge each other in the art of singing. Most of Murray's poems in this

[43] Les Murray & Geoffrey Lehmann, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1965).

collection also work their way steadily "backwards" into the Boeotian landscape of rural Australia. 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns' begins:

> In the high cool country,
> having come from the clouds,
> down a tilting road
> into a distant valley,
> you drive without haste. Your windscreen parts the forest,
> swaying and glancing, and jammed mid–day brilliance
> crouches in clearings...
> then you come across them,
> the sawmill towns, bare hamlets built of boards.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 11.)

And in 'Noonday Axeman', Murray notes:

> Though I myself run to the cities, I will forever
> be coming back here to walk, knee–deep in ferns,
> up and away from this metropolitan century,
>
> to remember my ancestors, axemen, dairy–men, horse–breakers.
> (*Collected Poems*, pp. 6–7.)

Among the "Boeotian" literatures which Murray discovered as a student in the Fisher Library was Gaelic: "I read Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and everything else in Gaelic that they had in Sydney University" (Personal Interview). Comprising six large volumes of incantations and prayers from the Scottish Highlands, Carmichael's work is a monumental record of an oral folk tradition which survived for centuries in the Gaelic communities. Furthermore, in his essay 'The Human–Hair Thread' Murray recalls "devouring" books and articles about Aboriginal culture,[44] and writing his first "heavily programmatic tales" about Aborigines as a student (ibid., p. 74). Generally, Murray's knowledge of Gaelic and Aboriginal culture has informed his sense of the bardic function of poetry, and so also helped him to arrange a space for himself as a poet who does not wish to snub his "fellow country people, those who hadn't had the education I was getting" (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 50). In 'The Human–Hair Thread', he speaks of the Aboriginal song–culture as "a vital source of health for all the members of the community" (pp. 96–7). Similarly, in 'The Lost Inheritance', Murray emphasises the way the old Celtic bards had "trained an audience": "the high standard of craftsmanship they had upheld stayed in the collective memory of the Gael. Poetry of a high order remained

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44 Les Murray, 'The Human–Hair Thread' , *The Paperbark Tree*, p. 84. Thus, it was in the Fisher Library that Murray first came across T. G. H. Strehlow's and R. M. Berndt's translations of Aborginal songs, found in "back issues of *Oceania*", as well as in R. M. and C. H. Berndt's *The First Australians* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952).

popular, a natural and accepted vehicle for expressing what was important to the society" (ibid., p. 20). This leads him to point out that "popular culture does not have to be crude, nor do its songs need to be always monosyllabic and simple to the point of illiteracy" (pp. 20–1). This is central to Murray's own role as a "Peasant Mandarin", whose function he touched upon in an interview with Jim Davidson: "Like this question I had to think about...: There you are, Murray, you write a highly literate verse and pretend it's about and for poor and uneducated people...the real answer is, Would you give those people anything less than the best? Your best?"[45]

Murray's adoption of such a bardic stance has also informed his attempts to rehabilitate a wider literary heritage in Australia. Reviewing Tony Conran's *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* in 1987, he echoed concerns voiced earlier in 'The Narrow–Columned Middle Ground', saying with reference to the old Celtic bards:

> Verse is also a medium which many Australians have...reached for to express things about their society; a strong current of 'light' newspaper verse overlapped with the evolving ballad tradition right through the nineteenth century and well into this one and was a powerful shaper of attitudes.[46]

But to Murray, Gaelic literature has been more than just an inspirational model for defining an Australian vernacular tradition. If the English syllabus at Sydney University was experienced as an alien culture, Gaelic linked more closely with his own European — and consequently also Australian — background. As he notes in 'Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn': "my fathers were Highlanders long ago/ then Borderers, before this landfall/ — "savages" once, now we are "settlers"" (*Collected Poems*, p. 156). On several occasions, Murray has discussed his Scottish heritage, and spoken about the need to acknowledge on a wider scale the Celtic element as one of several distinguishing traits of an Australian national identity. In 'The Lost Inheritance', he notes that "from the beginning white Australians have been an Anglo–Celtic rather than an Anglo–Saxon people", commenting further on the educational system in Australia: "The insistence of the Anglo–Australian Establishment...that our education be based almost exclusively on the priorities of the gentry and merchant classes of England, on the English bourgeois

45 Les Murray, interview with Jim Davidson, *Meanjin*, 41.1, April 1982, p. 121.

46 Les Murray, 'A Tribute to Old Delight', *The Paperbark Tree*, p. 314.

interpretation of history, is out of date for us now, a colonial hangover."[47] Similarly, in 'The Bonnie Disproportion', he points out:

> The enormous number of Scots and Scottish descendants, in proportion to our share of the population, who have been leaders in commerce, in politics, in education, in military matters and in the pastoral industry is pretty well known, even in the absence of any really comprehensive and respectable study of the Scottish part in Australian history (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 103).

But while acknowledging the success of "wealthier and better–educated Scottish immigrants, people who rose fairly inevitably in colonial society" (ibid., p. 122), Murray is driven by a need to voice the experience of those rural settlers who were relegated by a growing, English–dominated city–culture, but at the same time have been able to cling on to their Celtic inheritance. Outlining his own family history in 'The Bonnie Disproportion', he describes a life–style that followed "a very ancient pattern embedded in their civilization" (p. 113), centering around the "extended clan–family", which, according to Murray, "may yet prove the most durable legacy of the Gaelic past" (p. 106). This community structure is also commemorated in 'The Steel', a poem addressed to a local doctor who had failed to assist the poet's mother when she was fatally ill:

> As your practice disappeared
> and you were cold–shouldered in town
> till you broke and fled,
> did you think of the word *Clan*?
>
> It is an antique
> concept. But not wholly romantic.
> We came to the river early;
> it gives us some protection.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 193.)

However, Murray is also aware that in any immigrant situation, the cultural heritage is highly exposed. In 'The Bonnie Disproportion' he notes:

> As the ancestral motherland recedes farther into the past, it becomes a dream, a fossilized style, a place of the wise dead. You have been taught to look to it for significance and depth, and yet it has become remote, a haunting tune recovered only in the extremity, and then inpossible to hold. My grandfather's generation was just at that distance from Scotland, in their lives (p. 119).

Murray's account of his grandparents' situation corresponds with the processes David

[47] Ibid., p. 18. By the late 1970s/ early 1980s, Sydney University eventually set up a School of Celtic Studies, clearly as a result of a debate to which Murray has contributed extensively, but as he notes in connection with his own university experience: "my timing was off: there wasn't anything there when I wanted to go and learn these languages. But by the time it got set up, I was going home to the bush, and I never got to use it" (Personal Interview).

Malouf explores in his novel *Remembering Babylon*. Set in a rural community in nineteenth–century Australia, the book relays how Jane, the daughter of Scottish settlers, dreams of a homeland she has never seen:

> She was in love with this other life her parents had lived, with Scotland and a time before they came to Australia, before she was born, that was her time, too, extending her life back beyond the few years she could actually recall, and giving reality to a world she had need of.[48]

But when a cousin arrives from Scotland Jane finds that her vision of "home" does not correspond with his first–hand accounts, and she feels humiliated when she fails to understand his Scottish dialect.

In 'Lachlan Macquarie's First Language' Murray writes of the Celtic Australians: "They had lost the Gaelic in them. It had become/ like a tendon a man has no knowledge of in his body/ but which puzzles his bending, at whiles, with a flexing impulse" (*Collected Poems*, p. 120). The image summarises his notion that if the Celtic heritage has faded in the Australian consciousness, it still survives on a subconscious level. In this way, Murray is also aware that while the non–literate, oral element of his own native, rural culture has endangered the maintenance of a collective memory, it also represents the continuation of a Gaelic sensibility. Even the increasingly nostalgic vision of the old mother culture can be seen as a surviving Gaelic temperament. Speaking of the ancient Celtic bards in 'The Lost Inheritance', Murray refers to "their usual ambit of genealogy, eulogy, and elegy", stressing the way they upheld "society by praising and commemorating the chiefs and celebrating high deeds" (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 20). But if the cultural patterns of an ancestral past have survived, the actual image of the motherland becomes imagined, giving way to an increased awareness of the new surroundings, in this case the bush. 'Noonday Axeman' beautifully captures this cultural process, when in stanzas three and four the axeman begins to speak of his Gaelic legacy:

> Here, I remember all of a hundred years:
> candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,
> the draywheels' silence final in our ears,
> and the first red cattle spreading through the hills
>
> and my great–great–grandfather here with his first sons,
> who would grow old, still speaking with his Scots accent,
> having never seen those highlands that they sang of.
> A hundred years. I stand and smoke in silence.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 5.)

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48 David Malouf, *Remembering Balylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 54.

The silence is a central presence throughout the poem, denoting the bush and its resistance to time — the twentieth century, we are told in the opening stanza, is only "Two miles from here". And by a subtle use of internal rhyme, Murray yokes the "silence" together with an inherited memory of the "highlands". On one level, this expresses the axeman's sense of belonging in the bush, leading to the assertion later in the poem that "women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves/ year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children/ have made this silence human and familiar." At the same time, the linking of the two words also betrays a sense of unease on the part of the axeman: while acting as a hiatus that defends his Gaelic past against the twentieth century, the silence also threatens to erase his memory. In this way the poem portrays the gradual, if uneasy, transition from an immigrant culture to a native, vernacular culture.

Murray's discovery of Gaelic poetry during his time at Sydney University did not just open his eyes to the historical dimension of a Celtic heritage. Speaking to Carole Oles, he notes in connection with his own poetic voice: "I have been more influenced by the sound of old Celtic poetry than a lot of other things" (Oles, p. 33). But if he had begun to feel his way into Gaelic poetry already as a student, he also admits that he was "stymied...by uncertainty about proper Gaelic pronunciation" ('A Tribute to Old Delight', p. 310). Later, in 1967, during a long stay in Britain Murray taught himself Welsh, realising that its "clear phonetic orthography...allowed me to sound and pronounce it with an accuracy which native judges approved" (ibid.). Generally, Conran's *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* became his "high–road into the all–important side of Celtic poetry":

> What echoed continually and fascinatingly for me out of Conran's translations...was all–over patterning of cross references and cross resonance, a kind of ever–growing crystal lattice of sound and sense at once. I was amazed by the continual fine shifts of key... [T]he Penguin book did...immensely sharpen my appreciation of masculine/ feminine rhyme as a tripping, leaping, sometimes even limping alternative to the stiffer march of English rhyme, with its ever–successive finalities, its continual stoppage. I saw that rhyme, in the hands of its inventors and first masters, was a more flexible, resourceful thing than I had imagined, and capable of more nuance (p. 312).

These aural elements have become a central feature of Murray's own voice. In 'Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn', he claims to be "writing Gaelic in English words" (*Collected Poems*, p. 156). And everywhere in his works we find masculine/ feminine rhymes, such as *west/ forest*, *tens/ beacons*, *days/ perches* in 'The Flying Fox Dreaming' (ibid., p. 122), or *wing/ building*, *mirror/ queer* in 'Bats' Ultrasound' (ibid., p. 260). In addition, his language is often densely chimed. 'A Walk with O'Connor' from *The WeatherboardCathedral* (1969), for instance, begins: "A winter's day of wind, and no

horizon./ Out of the vagueness, breakers on cold grey sand" (ibid., p. 31). These opening lines set the aural mode of the entire poem, launching a vowel–music that fluctuates between strings of [eɪ]–sounds (*day — vague*ness — *brea*kers — *grey — way — fa*mous — *scaled*, etcetera) and [əʊ]–sounds (*no — cold — coa*st — *ho*mes — *o*ver — he*roes — co*ves — *low — quo*tation, etcetera). Fond of deploying such chimes, Murray also frequently plays with chiastic cross–resonances. In 'The Abomination', we have in the first stanza alone: *dew/ wet, shadow/ wood, adze/ traps* (ibid., p. 22).

All of this echoes Heaney's use of the Irish *Deibidhe* tradition, as discussed earlier in Chapter 1. A recent reviewer also noted that Murray's early poetry "shunts pleasantly along the same grooves of diction as one finds in sixties Heaney", although ascribing it primarily to the impact of Dylan Thomas and Hopkins.[49] This connection with Hopkins is equally valid, however, and one which Murray has made himself. Speaking of Conran's translations of Welsh poetry, he points out: "The effect...was bodily. The poetry clung in the ear, but it also went through the mind of the body's realm of dance and gesture. It did the same things to me as the poetry of Fr Hopkins SJ, whose work had turned me on to poetry itself when I was a schoolboy". And he continues:

> I was also imbibing a lasting corrective...to the slackness of the *vers libre* and *vers libéré* which had pretty well taken over modern poetry in English. I began to see *that* as an intellectual's poetry, dependent on the aesthetics of *interest*. Poetry, in its fulness...requires the sympathy of the body, the ghostly activation of ear and breath and muscles. When thought and dream harmonize with the element of gesture, of the dance, poetry becomes what I call Wholespeak ('A Tribute to Old Delight', pp. 311–2).

The cultural implications which Murray touches upon here also shed light on the formal aspects of his own voice. Generally striving for a wider audience, he feels a need to react against a highly intellectualised tradition of modern English poetry. Speaking of a poetry which — like dance and gesture — requires the sympathy of the body, he attacks the exclusiveness of turning it into a purely cerebral art–form, pointing instead to its ancient cultural function as an oral communal activity. Murray finds that people have generally been let down by modern poetry, not merely because of its mandarin, intellectualising tendencies, but also because of its slackness of form. It an interview from 1992 he suggested, and perhaps rightly so, that a wider reading public feels "poetry has been lacking because rhyme has been abandoned".[50]

Drawing on the aural strengths of a Celtic poetic tradition has enabled Murray to

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[49] John Redmond, 'Clearly Crass', review of *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, *Metre*, 2, Spring 1997, p. 82.
[50] Les Murray, interview with Barbara Williams, *Westerly*, 37.2, Winter 1992, p. 52.

strike a bardic voice that can *enact* musically, as well as address, his vernacular heritage. Just as he has described the Gaelic element in Australian culture as "a flexing impulse", it is fitting that this element should ghost his poetry as a sensuous, even bodily, gesture. In the early poem 'Evening Alone at Bunyah', Murray refers to the process of composition as "*danc[ing]// on bits of paper*", seeing it as a continuation of those communal rites which his father takes part in "at a hall/ in the dark of the country, shining at the waltz" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 13–6). This notion of the bodily element of poetic composition furthermore links with an Aboriginal song tradition. As Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt illustrated in their study *The World of the First Australians*, sacred Aboriginal songs were "usually sung in a special setting: on the men's dancing ground, or in association with ritual sequences", with the audience "ready to join in the singing, clap their thighs to the rhythm, or jump up to dance".[51] As to the formal characteristics of Aboriginal poetry, the Berndts generally point to a "considerable technical skill, in the choice and arrangement of words, the use of metre and stress in the tonal patterning, the matching of sounds — and the relation of the whole to a particular tune" (p. 311). Like Celtic poetry, the Aboriginal song tradition is characterised by chiastic effects, by repetitions and inversions of sounds and phrases. This element is also captured in Ronald Berndt's English translation of the Wonguri–Mandjigai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone, which was an inspirational model for Murray's 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle':

> They are sitting about in the camp, among the branches, along the
> back of the camp:
> Sitting in rows in the camp, in the shade of the paperbark trees:
> Sitting in rows, like new white spreading clouds:
> In the shade of the paperbark trees, they are sitting resting like clouds.
> (*The World of the First Australians*, p. 313.)

Similarly, section 6 of 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle' begins:

> Barbecue smoke is rising at Legge's Camp; it is steaming into the
> midday air,
> all around the lake shore, at the Broadwater, it is going up
> among the paperbark trees
> a heat–shimmer of sauces, rising from tripods and flat steel, at
> that place of the cone shells.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 144.)

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[51] R. M. & C. H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964), Chapter XI: 'Art and Aesthetic Expression', pp. 308–9. (This study is an expanded edition of *The First Australians*, which Murray read as a student.)

In Aboriginal as well as Celtic poetry, Murray thus found an aural and formal alternative to "the stiffer march of English rhyme, with its ever–successive finalities" ('A Tribute to Old Delight', p. 312). As he explains in 'The Human–Hair Thread', during the early stages of his poetic career his sense of an English tradition became a stumbling block for his appropriation of Aboriginal material. Commenting on 'The Rock Shelters, Botany Bay' from *The Weatherboard Cathedral*, Murray calls it "[t]he first poem in which I attempted to capture some of the rhythms and feeling of Aboriginal poetry", but dismisses it as "a rather pallid poem, 'poetic' in a bad sense...a counterfeit of another culture's poetry" ('The Human–Hair Thread', p. 78). With 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle' however, Murray breaks formally with conventional English versification. As Christopher Pollnitz has pointed out, "[n]either syllable– nor stress–count will show the metrical principle of this verse, which is based on the unit of grammar."[52] Again, this was inspired by Berndt's translation of the Wonguri–Mandjigai Song Cycle, which Murray describes as "a sort of telegraphese verbal shorthand...[in] long syntactically complete lines" that "render[ ] the Aboriginal poetry into a language deeply in tune with the best Australian vernacular speech" ('The Human–Hair Thread', pp. 90–92). In the same way, by defying metrical conventions in 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle', Murray has arguably created a medium that accommodates a colloquial Australian idiom. In 'Big Man's Music: Les Murray's Metric', Douglas Dunn makes a general case for seeing his expansive lines and rhythms as an aesthetic manifestation of "sprawl", the principle by which the poet identifies the soul of his vernacular republic.[53]

Central to Murray's appropriation of Celtic as well as Aboriginal poetry has been a need to develop a ceremonial voice that celebrates the Australian land. Murray has frequently reiterated his conviction that a proper understanding of the continent itself, with its climates, flora and fauna, is an essential step towards an articulation of an Australian identity. Speaking to Robert Crawford, he notes:

> there's a lot of Australia that has not been assimilated into English yet. There are many plants in Australia, for example, which have only their Greco–Latin botanical names. All that work of hymning the plants and animals and the landscape...has pretty well been done [in Europe], but in Australia it's just at the start.[54]

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52 Christopher Pollnitz, 'The Bardic Pose: A Survey of Les A. Murray's Poetry, III', *Southerly*, 41.2, June 1981, p. 189.

53 Douglas Dunn, 'Big Man's Music: Les Murray's Metric', in *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale: Kardoorair Press, 1997). See also Murray's poem 'The Quality of Sprawl', in which he notes that "Sprawl occurs in art. The fifteenth to twenty–first/ lines in a sonnet, for example" (*Collected Poems*, p. 186).

54 Les Murray, interview with Robert Crawford, *Verse*, 3.1, 1986, p. 23.

This task of "hymning" Australia was also the idea behind the publication of *The Australian Year: The Chronicle of Our Seasons and Celebrations*. Presenting itself as a coffee–table book, and targeting a wide readership, it is at the same time a serious attempt to explore though words and pictures the seasonal changes, which, as Murray states, can be obscure "even to native–born Australians".[55] Apart from the main essays, which investigate varying aspects of an Australian twentieth–century culture that still has to adapt to the country's ecology, the book includes some of Murray's best celebratory nature poems. As well as being onomastic listings, these poems often read as onomatopoeic evocations of the land, as in 'Bent Water in the Tasmanian Highlands', where the long, densely–textured sentences mimic the sounds of running water:

> Flashy wrists out of buttoned grass cuffs, feral whisky burning gravels,
> jazzy knuckles ajitter on soakages, peaty cupfuls, soft pots overflowing,
> setting out along the great curve, migrating mouse–quivering water,
> mountain–driven winter water, in the high tweed, stripping off its mountains
> to run faster in its skin, it swallows the above, it feeds where it is fed on,
> it forms at many points and creases outwards, pleated water
> shaking out its bedding soil, increasing its scale, beginning the headlong.
> (*Collected Poems*, pp. 180–1.)

Working along the same lines as Hugh MacDiarmid's 'Water Music' (although Murray's lines are longer), 'Bent Water' also seems to draw on Aboriginal material — in this case the Ridarngu people's cycle about the wet season, here once again in Ronald Berndt's translation:

> Fresh water running, splashing, swirling,
> Running over slippery stones...clear water...
> Carrying leaves and bushes before it...
> Swirling around...
>
> Water running, running from pool to pool...
> Water running in streams,
> Foaming, carrying leaves and bushes before it...churning,
> Bubbling up among the Miljarwi clansfolk.
> Water flowing over the rocks...flowing each side of the termite
> mounds,
> Running fast toward Nalibinunggu clansfolk...Ridarngu...
> Gaiilindjil...Ridarngu,
> Toward the Bunangaidjini Wonguri...
> Fast–running water.
> (*The World of the First Australians*, p. 314.)

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55 Les Murray, *The Australian Year: The Chronicle of Our Seasons and Celebrations* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1985), p. 1.

In 'Bent Water' Murray's voice reaches an incantatory pitch, but without losing a colloquial, down–to–earth idiom ("It swallows the above"; "pleated water/ shaking out its bedding soil"). A similar tone can be found in poems like 'The Broad Bean Sermon': "Upright with water like men, square in stem–section/ they grow to great lengths, drink rain, keel over all ways,/ kink down and grow up afresh, with proffered new greenstuff" (*Collected Poems*, p. 115), and 'Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn': "its strung haze–blue foliage is dancing/ points down in breezy mobs, swabbing pace and place in an all–over sway" (ibid., p. 208).

In connection with 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle', Douglas Dunn speaks of Murray's "feat of listing and naming, of getting it all down on paper", of his "itemising syntax" and "instinctive imitation of the sound of a long line of verse, an imitation which seems drawn from a domesticated epic understanding of place, people and experience" ('Big Man's Music', p. 75). This again links with Murray's sense of working within a Boeotian tradition. In 'On Sitting Back and Thinking About Porter's Boeotia', he notes:

> There is evidence that a specifically Boeotian style of poetry, called by that name, may have existed in Homeric times and later. Some elements in the *Iliad*, especially, may be Boeotian. The famous catalogue of ships is a case in point. The catalogue seems to be a typically Boeotian device. The Athenians *count*, we may say, while Boeotians *list* and *name*. The distinction makes for a profound difference in cultures that follow one model or the other (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 58).

This passage also points towards a formal aspect of 'Walking to the Cattle Place', Murray's Boeotian poem *par excellence*, which, picking up the thread from 'Towards the Imminent Days', hails the cattle culture of his rural Australia.[56] In 'Towards the Imminent Days', the poet had portrayed a "prosperous, well–mannered" people that was "gentle with cows" (*Collected Poems*, p. 41), a culture which in 'Walking to the Cattle Place' is contrasted to the cities' abattoirs, where "the plains of cash and the captive bolt/ ...the clotted panic" rule, where cows

> are chilled from dripping
> and marbled in their fat...
> till out of cool rooms they crowd into our veins
> through the sawdust gate.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 64.)

[56] As James Stewart has pointed out in his essay 'In the Land of Cows–to–Milk: On Sitting Back and Thinking of Murray's Boeotia', Boeotia was "probably so called from its abundance of cattle", its name derived from the Greek word for ox, *bous* (*Angles on the English–Speaking World*, 2, 1987, p. 48).

The sequence furthermore takes on an epic sweep, with Murray linking his rural Australia to an "alternative antiquity"[57], which incorporates ancient Indian, African as well as European cattle–worshipping cultures. In addition to the text's overt Boeotian references — discussed by James Stewart — 'Walking to the Cattle Place' draws on the sort of cattle–hymning which is found in the Gaelic songs collected under the heading 'Cattle Stock' in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*. All of this is epitomised in section 10, 'The Boeotian Count', in which Murray draws up a long catalogue, *listing* and *naming* rather than *counting* his herd:

> Maudie
> Maisie
> Shit–in–the–bail
> Quince
> Blossom Daisy
> shy Abigail
> Primavera
> Strawberry Doris
> one with a twostroke udd–
> ah Marrabel Arabelle
> Horace huge Onnanolia.
> (*Collected Poems*, pp. 69–70.)

Pitching this sort of cataloguing against the sensibility of an Athenian culture, Murray points to "A meaningful lack in the mother–tongue of factories":

> how do you say *one* cattle? Cow, bull, steer
> but nothing like *bos*. *Cattle* is *chattel*, is owned
>
> by man the castrator,
> body and innocence, cud and death–bellow and beef.
> Bush people say *beast*, and mean no more fabulous creature.
> ('The Names of the Humble', ibid., p. 61.)

Murray's 'Boeotian Count' clearly also echoes Derek Walcott's 'A Sea–Chantey', which reads as a long Homeric catalogue listing and naming the poet's Caribbean. Like Murray, Walcott steers— formally as well as aurally — for a ceremonial, celebratory evocation of his land, a poetic project that furthermore corresponds with the old Irish *dinnseanchas* which Heaney drew inspiration from in pieces like 'Toome', 'Broagh' and 'Anahorish'. Commenting on the old Irish poetry of place in his essay 'The Lore of High Places', Murray notes that "[e]very people, pretty well, has a similar impulse. Dindshenchas [*sic*], in a wider sense, constitutes a large part of the religion of some

[57] The phrase with which Murray describes his Gaelic inheritance in 'Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn' (*Collected Poems*, p. 156).

peoples, notably the Aborigines."[58] This sense of place was also expressed in a poem like 'Escaping Out There' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 102–4), which in Murray's own words uses "imaginary place–names constructed on an Aboriginal model — the Flying Fox Cooking–Place and Praising White Moth Larvae — along with other local names constructed on a not dissimilar rural white model: Where The Old School Got Burnt and Where The Big Red Bull Went Over" ('The Human–Hair Thread', p. 83). Such place–names invest the landscape with a communal memory, and so establish a strong sense of familiarity with it. And this kind of bonding is often asserted in Murray's poetry, as he deploys Aboriginal imagery to describe the bush. For instance, when he describes the Eucalypt tree as "That slim creek out of the sky" in 'Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn' (*Collected Poems*, p. 208), he conveys an Aboriginal understanding of the dryness of the land, and the importance of its vegetation as crucial landmarks — in this case a landmark signifying the presence of water.

Drawing on this kind of visionary strength Murray seeks to lay spiritual claim to his country. The final section of 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle' once again moulds itself on the concluding passage of the Wonguri–Mandjigai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone, which describes the Evening Star sinking in the West:

> The lotus, Evening Star, hangs there on its long stalk held by the Spirits.
> (...)
> Hanging there in the distance, toward the Place of the Dungog,
> The Place of the Eggs, of Tree–Limbs–Rubbing–Together, Place of the Moonlight Clay–pan...
> (...)
> Evening Star going down, lotus flower on its stalk...
> Going down among all the western clans...
> It brushes the heads of the uncircumcised people...
> Sinking down down in the sky, the Evening Star, the lotus...
> Shining on to the foreheads of all those headmen...
> On to the heads of all those Sandfly people...
> It sinks into the place of the white gum trees, at Milingimbi.
> (*The World of the First Australians*, p. 314.)

The theme of spiritual initiation in this passage ("It brushes the heads of the uncircumsised people") is carefully echoed by Murray, although the numinous is gently adjusted to a Christian ethos as the configuration of stars becomes an embodiment of Christ:

> People recover the starlight, hitching north,
> travelling north beyond the seasons into that country of the Communes, and of the banana:
> the Flying Horse, the Rescued Girl, and the Bull, burning steadily

[58] Les Murray, 'The Lore of High Places', in *The Peasant Mandarin: Prose Pieces* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 46.

above that country.
(...)
People go outside and look at the stars, and at the melon–rind moon,
the Scorpion going down into the mountains, over there towards Waukivory, sinking into the tree–line,
in the time of the Rockmelons, and of the Holiday...
the Cross is rising on his elbow, above the glow of the horizon;
carrying a small star in his pocket, he reclines there brilliantly,
above the Alum Mountain, and the lakes threaded on the Myall River, and above the Holiday.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 150.)

Commenting on Murray's religious sensibility, Nicholas Birns rightly observes that his "Catholicism is not of the exclusive "high" type acceeded to by Tory British writers such as Evelyn Waugh".[59] Referring to Murray's habit of dedicating his books "To the Glory of God", Birns elaborates:

> The dedication has often been underread, as if it were to God rather than to the Glory of God. "Glory", adapted from the Hebrew *kavod* and the Greek *doxa*, means not God's full presence but his manifestation, the effect by which he shows his power to man yet which curtains off the fully revealed presence. "The Glory of God" is very much God–in–the–world, God as he appears to us (ibid., p. 61).

As Birns also notes, this enables Murray to link his Christian sensibility with an Aboriginal spirituality. But significantly, it also connects with a Celtic tradition, which is heavily informed by an understanding of God's presence in all living things. Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* provided Murray with a rich source of religious incantations, whose spirituality rested largely on a hymning of the natural world. Like the sacred Aboriginal songs, *Carmina Gadelica* lists numerous examples of moon–worshipping:

Hail to thee, thou new moon,
Guiding jewel of gentleness!
I am bending to thee my knee,
I am offering thee my love.

(...)

Thou art travelling in thy course,
Thou art steering the full tides;
Thou art illuming to us thy face,
O new moon of the seasons.[60]

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59 Nicholas Birns, '"Religions are poems": Spirituality in Les Murray's Poetry', in *"And the Birds Began to Sing": Religion and Literature in Post–Colonial Cultures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press (*Cross/ Cultures* 22), 1996), p. 60.

60 'New Moon', poem no. 309 in Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*, new one–volume English edition, ed. C. J. Moore (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1994), p. 287. (This edition hereafter cited as *Carmina Gadelica*.)

Drawing extensively on Aboriginal and Celtic material, Murray's communing with God consists largely of tapping into the spirituality of the natural world. Surely one of his most striking poetic achievements to date is his 'Presence' sequence from *Translations from the Natural World*, which, as the book's title also indicates, seeks to widen the language so as to represent the normally inarticulate. In this way, the 'Presence' poems refine the non–human strains of speech with which Murray had previously experimented in 'Cows on Killing Day'[61] and 'Bats' Ultrasound' (*Collected Poems*, p. 260). In 'Lyre Bird':

> Liar made of leaf–litter, quivering ribby in shim,
> hen–sized under froufrou, chinks in a quiff display him
> or her, dancing in mating time, or out. And in any order.
> Tailed mimic aeon–scnt to intrigue the next recorder,
> I mew cat–bird, I saw crosscut, I howl she–dingo, I kink
> forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link
> cattlebell with kettle–boil; I rank ducks' cranky presidium
> or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim.[62]

Robert Crawford makes an interesting and valid connection between Murray's 'Presence' sequence and the Old English riddles, pointing furthermore to the acoustic impact of Hopkins.[63] But once again, *Carmina Gadelica* looms as an inspirational source behind these poems, as Carmichael's work includes whole sections dedicated to 'Live Creatures' and 'Plants'. 'The Speech of Birds', for instance, consists of rhymes that imitate and "translate" the various songs of birds:

> The Mavis said:
> Little red lad!
> Little red lad!
> Come away home!
> Come Away home!
> Come Away home,
> My dear, to your dinner!
> (*Carmina Gadelica*, p. 325.)

And in 'The Swan':

> *Giuliog i! guiliog o!*
> *Giuliog i! guiliog o!*
> *Giuliog i! guiliog o!*
> Voice of the swan, voice of the bird!
> (Ibid., p. 328.)

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61 Les Murray, 'Cows on Killing Day', *Dog Fox Field* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 27–8.

62 Les Murray, 'Lyre Bird', *Translations from the Natural World* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 21.

63 Robert Crawford, 'Les Murray's 'Presence Sequence'', in *Counterbalancing Light* (op. cit.), pp. 54–68.

Murray's 'Presence' sequence can be seen as his ultimate realisation of a voice of embodiment and incarnation, of a poetry that seeks, as he states it in 'Satis Passio', to "join[ ] creation from our side,/ enter[ ] Nature, become a fact/ and acquired presence" (*Collected Poems*, p. 223). Elsewhere, linking poetry and religion, Murray makes a distinction between what he calls "Wholespeak" and "Narrowspeak". "Wholespeak", which encompasses religion and "all good poetry", is the "balance of dream and reason, emotion, instinct dance and presence", while "Narrowspeak" refers to "language in which the whole person is no longer (or not yet) truly engaged, and which therefore can't fully move us, though it may hurry us about".[64] Similarly, in 'Poetry and Religion' from *The Daylight Moon* (1987), he writes:

> Religions are poems. They concert
> our daylight and dreaming mind, our
> emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture
>
> into the only whole thinking: poetry.
> Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words
> and nothing's true that figures in words only.
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 272.)

An awareness of the sacredness of poetry, of its function as a spiritual and communal force, is central to Murray's role as a "Peasant Mandarin" who upholds a Boeotian heritage, partly to accommodate his own "provinciality", but also in a wider attempt to "re–culture" us, to revive a poetic word–culture that has suffered in a post–war metropolitan age. Particularly the oral folk traditions of Celtic and Aboriginal poetry represent to him a sort of "Wholespeak", which in a late–twentieth–century context serves as an antidote to the "Narrowspeak" of an Athenian intellectual culture. But because of its sacred nature, Murray's borrowing of Aboriginal material especially has also been a precarious process. As Murray notes: "The great strength of Aboriginal literature is an area which is really a no–go area, that is the old traditional tribal myths" (Personal Interview). Talking to Carole Oles, he elaborates: "it's not a good idea and never was to borrow Aboriginal secret material if you ever come across it, because that in their terms is close to blasphemy; you've got to be careful what the religious status of anything that you borrow is" (Oles, p. 27). Consequently, Murray has relied largely on the translations of "responsible scholars...[where] one may be sure one is not reproducing anything which should not be published" ('The Human–Hair Thread', p. 97). Among the "responsible

64 Les Murray, 'Poems and Poesies, *The Paperbark Tree*, pp. 348–50. See also 'Embodiment and Incarnation' (ibid., pp. 251–69), and 'Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment' (ibid., pp. 356–71). All of these essays deal with religion, poetry and "Wholespeak".

scholars" he singles out in 'The Human–Hair Thread' are Ronald Berndt and T. G. H. Strehlow, who, owing to their close contact with Aboriginal tribes, were entrusted with sacred verses, in order to "preserve them against the day when the old culture died out" (ibid.). At his death, Strehlow "still held large amounts of material which cannot and should not be released until those who own it in the traditional sense are dead" (ibid.).

Both Strehlow and Berndt can be seen as important models for Murray's "Peasant Mandarin". And the way in which they preserved an Aboriginal song–material while remaining sensitive to the surviving culture and its taboos furthermore reflects the type of scholarship also practiced by Alexander Carmichael in *Carmina Gadelica*. Collecting the songs and poems of the Gaelic Highlands and Islands during his travels as a Civil Servant for Customs and Excise, Carmichael had been driven by a need to secure the legacy of an otherwise fading oral culture. But at the same time, he was also conscious that the process of anthologising could in itself be seen as a violation of the sacred nature of the material he was working with. In a tribute to Carmichael, printed in volume IV of the original edition, the Reverend Dr. Kenneth MacLeod pointed out:

> *Carmina Gadelica*....does not show the full extent of his intimacy with the folk and their childlike confidence in his sympathy. Not all of what he learned was written down, or if written down, has been preserved; many curious rites, embodied in unusual language, the outpourings of simple hearts in less conventional days, were revealed to him under a strict pledge of secrecy — a pledge which, needless to say, has been faithfully kept.[65]

To a great extent, Carmichael's scholarly enterprise was made possible because he was himself part of the culture he was mapping out. According to MacLeod, "we never thought of him as as one merely collecting and dissecting our beliefs in the more or less sacred name of science; we though of him rather as one who saw with our eyes, who felt with our heart, and who reproduced our past because he loved it and was proud of it" (ibid., p. xxix). And Carmichael clearly also fits well into the non–academic intellectual tradition which Murray draws up for himself in 'The Bonnie Disproportion', saying: "the self–educated lad o' parts is a well–known Scots intellectual figure. James Murray and Hugh MacDiarmid, himself a Murray on his mother's side, are two examples out of many. James Hogg and the quarryman geologist Hugh Miller are two more".[66] In fact, commenting on his initial encounter with *Carmina Gadelica*, Murray admits that it "was

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65 Kenneth MacLeod, 'Our Interpreter', in Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. IV, ed. J. Carmichael Watson (Edinburgh/ London: Oliver & Boyd, 1941), p. xxxi.

66 p. 123. Similarly, making a further link in 'The Lore of High Places' Murray argues how folk scholarship is "an interesting phenomenon, particularly well–developed in Australia" (*The Peasant Mandarin*, p. 45). (See also 'A Folk University' in *The Paperbark Tree*.)

where I got the idea of the "Peasant Mandarin"" (Personal Interview).

By adopting the image of folk scholar, Murray has created a functional space in which he can distance himself from an academic–led high–cultural establishment. But more importantly, it has enabled him to reconcile the sophisticated, educated side of himself with his cultural hinterland, the "peasant" and the "mandarin". What legitimises his use of Aboriginal material is his sense of a shared Boeotian sensibility. In 'The Human–Hair Thread', he addresses the perceived distinctions between a rural white and indigenous black Australia:

> The Aborigines were partly a people, partly a caste, partly a class, though really that last term is inaccurate: they were actually part of a larger class of the rural poor, and it is still often more useful to see them in that light than in currently fashionable radical–racialist terms. We, my family, were in the same class ourselves (p. 72).

Similarly, in 'Walking to the Cattle Place', the poet speaks of "the four castes in our country...plus such as myself/ and the genuine black men" (*Collected Poems*, p. 66), expressing an affinity later reiterated in the poem entitled 'Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit' (ibid., p. 97). While Murray stresses that the sacredness of some Aboriginal texts must be observed, he also argues that artistic borrowing can be an act of respect which "leaves the lender no poorer, and draws attention to his riches" ('The Human–Hair Thread', p. 71). As a poet drawing on an indigenous tradition, his aim is not to transcribe or reproduce the legacy of a fading culture:

> I want my poems to be more than just National Parks of sentimental preservation, useful as the National Parks are as holding operations in the modern age. What I am after is a spiritual change that would make them unnecessary (ibid., pp. 95–6).

As he also points out in his conversation with Carole Oles, his appropriation of Aboriginal material is part of his quest for a creolised and distinctly Australian voice, and consequently he draws on "structures and the turn of mind rather than the actual content" (Oles, p. 28).

In this way, Murray has continued the work of the Jindyworobak movement, basing his enterprise as an Australian poet on a cultural cross–fertilisation. And the most influential exemplar among the Jindyworobaks has undoubtedly been Roland Robinson, whom Murray anthologised as one of his "Fivefathers", commemorating him as yet another Peasant Mandarin who "was in no sense an intellectual poet of the university age", and who "identified deeply with the minstrels and folk poets of all places and

periods" (*Fivefathers*, p. 61). The selection in *Fivefathers* is in itself a perfect illustration of how Robinson's poetry has informed Murray's nature poetry. In addition to his "Aboriginal" poems, pieces like 'Swift' (p. 64), 'The Ibis' (pp. 67–8), 'The Tea–Tree and the Lyre–Bird' (p. 70) and 'Northern Oriole' (p. 91) seem to prefigure Murray's 'Presence' sequence. 'Northern Oriole', for instance, deploys a language which seeks to mimic the bird's "echoing song":

> Now from the poinciana's bough
> sounds his echoing song, and now
> deep within the banyan's shade,
> that bell like, flute cool call is made.
> High in the orange flowering gum
> his voice is heard, but where I come
> he makes no more that blended note
> as though the rain had filled his throat.

When Murray has been considerably more successful than his Jindyworobak precursors in appropriating an indigenous material, it is arguably because his cultural synthesizations have not been confined to a balancing of Aboriginal and English poetry. As illustrated, his discovery of a wider Boeotian tradition, in which Celtic folk literatures figure strongly, has proved to be a fruitful way of mediating between a European and an Australian inheritance. Besides, Murray's vision of Australia is not confined to a rural Boeotia, which saves his poetry from a sense of pre–twentieth–century, anthropological nostalgia. As a poet he is equally alert to the modern–day city culture of his country, as pieces like 'The Sydney Highrise Variations' reveal. In addition, Murray is a frequent and skilled hymner of modern technology, as in 'Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman', or 'Portrait of the Artist as a New World Driver', which celebrates the culture of the car:

> A car is also
> a high–speed hermitage. Here
> only the souls of policemen can get at you.
> Who would put in a telephone,
> that merciless foot–in–the–door
> of realities, realties?
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 104.)

In 'On Sitting Back and Thinking About Porter's Boeotia', Murray far from dismisses a twentieth–century Athenian culture, but argues that Australia may "find[ ] herself...to be one of the places in which some sort of synthesis [between Athens and Boeotia] might at last be achieved" (p. 57). And it is this dual sensibility which validates his version of a vernacular republic. The merits of a work like 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle'

lie in the way Murray manages to synthesize the three main strands of Australian culture: Aboriginal, rural and urban. Describing the annual exodus of Australian city–dwellers to the country during the holiday season, the poem renders it as a journey of rejuvenation, back to the spirit–country of the older generations. The road leading out of the city provides continuity, feeding the nation's soul, and is consequently seen as a modern–day version of the Rainbow Serpent, the Aboriginal deity of fertility.[67] In his search for a creolised national identity, Murray is furthermore concerned with the other–than–British immigrant cultures in Australia, as seen in 'Immigrant Voyage', and most recently in 'The Family Farmers' Victory' from *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, which explores the experience of Italian settlers.

In this way, assuming a bardic pose Murray acts not merely as a spokesperson for a relegated Boeotian culture, but seeks to speak for and to his nation. Central to his concerns as a poet is to maintain a close and dynamic relationship between society and its artists, something which has also informed his active involvement in a continued national debate on patronage of the arts. In 'Patronage in Australia' (1972), he called for the government to "provide for arts and for artists in a responsible way", arguing:

> Art is...a principle of health in society as in the person, and a model for social and personal growth. In a society characterized, as Western industrial society is, by *division*, art has an enormous potential value in that it is one of a very few institutions, all of them archaic in origin, whose effects are essentially *integrative*. If, however, artists are too deeply estranged from such a society, art can become a powerful disintegrative force. For lack of a charitable mirror in which to see its life reflected and celebrated, the society becomes dull and intransigent in its inner life, and the estranged caste of artists becomes unresponsive, élitist, and precarious, if not finally and violently antisocial. We have clearly gone a long way towards this situation already (*The Peasant Mandarin*, pp. 1–2).

Once again Murray expresses his disappointment with the universities' take–over of Australian literature, partly because their "natural intellectual bias" and "élitism" have distanced it from a wider readership (ibid., p. 10), but also because they have failed to provide any sustained financial support. Recently, he reiterated these concerns in the *Times Literary Supplement*, proposing a support system that may liberate Australian artists from the clutches of academia and the publishing industry, where they "are at once exploited and condescendingly encouraged to make a Bohemian circus of their

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[67] At the same time, however, Murray is also highly sceptical about the prospect of a synthesized Athenian–Boeotian culture in Australia. In 'Sydney and the Bush', for instance, he argues: "When Sydney and the Bush meet now/ there is antipathy", "When Sydney and the Bush meet now/ there is no common ground" (*Collected Poems*, p. 128).

poverty".[68] In this way, Murray reacts against a twentieth–century, post–Romantic image of the artist as a decadent Bohemian living on the fringe of society. In 'The Bohemian Occupation' from *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, Vaclav Havel is urged to "Take back Bohemia...take back the name" (p. 33).[69]

As 'The Bohemian Occupation' also illustrates, as a socially committed poet Murray is capable of shifting away from his own celebratory lyrical voice. His satirical verses in particular reveal his debt to the nineteenth–century broadsheet versifiers, whether they are in the form of shorter rhymed aphorisms, as in 'Writer in Residence' and 'A Public Figure', or longer ballad–style pieces like 'A Brief History':

> We are the Australians. Our history is short.
> This makes pastry chefs snotty and racehorses snort.
> It makes pride a blood poppy and work an export
> and bars our trained minds from original thought
> as all that can be named gets renamed away.
> (*Subhuman Redneck Poems*, p. 11.)

In such instances we are reminded of Heaney's expressed concern in the mid–1970s with finding a voice "that will speak for and to a culture...a voice that could *talk* as well as go into a trance."[70] Similarly, in his search for a democratic, socially committed voice, Tony Harrison has drawn on the example of nineteenth–century North of England broadsides and ballads.[71] In his obituary 'James McAuley — A Personal Appreciation', Murray identified as "the central and best tendency in Australian poetry" an "enlightened, inclusive, civil mode of writing which belongs ultimately to the middle style, but allows itself to dip up and down at need, and at best abolishes all levels by reconciling them" (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 69). This description clearly reflects Murray's own ambition of striking a flexible, democratic and colloquial voice. However, it can be argued that when allowing his voice to "dip down", he is occasionally in danger of losing touch with his own inclusive, civil mode, venturing into a no–man's land between art and polemics. In this way, 'Rock Music' from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* seems tainted by too much bitterness. It begins:

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68 Les Murray, 'Literary Funding in Australia', the *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 September 1993, p. 15.

69 As a partial acknowledgement of this idea of the poet's role in society, Murray was commissioned in the early 1990s to draft Australia's new pledge of allegiance. (See his own account in 'Making the Pledge', in *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), pp. 211–3.)

70 Seamus Heaney, interview with John Haffenden, *London Magazine*, June 1979, p. 23.

71 See my discussion in chapter 4.

> Sex is a Nazi. The students all knew
> this at your school. To it everyone's subhuman
> for parts of their lives. Some are all their lives.
> You'll be one of those if these things worry you.
> (*Subhuman Redneck Poems*, p. 16.)

Interestingly, Murray has pointed to a similar dilemma in connection with the works of James McAuley. Giving a list of "McAuley's Greats" in 'A Personal Appreciation', Murray voiced his disinclination to "include any of his polemical poems", explaining: "They are often full of good things, but they fail to escape [a] slightly peevish tone...that defiant making of brilliant points to a public one knows deep down is not listening" (p. 68). Indeed, the same can be said of Murray's more confrontational verses, although he is also aware of this problem. His short piece 'Politics and Art' from *Dog Fox Field*, for example, paradoxically castigates its own accusatory tone:

> Brutal policy,
> like inferior art, knows
> whose fault it all is.[72]

As noted, such verses seem to reflect an ambition to reach a wider audience than the usual class of poetasters. The same ambition has presumably also informed Murray's wish — first with *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, and most recently in *Fredy Neptune*[73] — to "reclaim the narrative for poetry".[74] Laid out as a verse novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* is structured as a sequence of 140 sonnets. In 'Notes on the Writing of a Novel Sequence', Murray explains:

> Every time I started to write the story in continuous verse, with a single metre or a varied one, it broke down almost at once...[But w]ith its containment and its one or more internal *volte* or turns, [the sonnet] seemed an ideal conjunction of discipline and freedom... It could be entire in itself, or it could serve as a unit in building up larger patterns (pp. 139–40).

But given the freedoms Murray is taking, what remains of the sonnet form is really only the fourteen–line unit, which twists and buckles throughout the sequence. Rhyme is largely suppressed, clearly in order to facilitate the narrative. This has led several commentators to question Murray's choice of the sonnet. Douglas Dunn thus argues that "[p]recise, well–defined forms...are radically unsuited to Murray's art... Generally speaking, his tunes and themes are...too symphonic for the chamber styles of art, or too

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[72] Les Murray, 'Politics and Art', *Dog Fox Field* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 75.

[73] Les Murray, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral: A Novel Sequence* (1981; Manchester: Carcanet, 1989); *Fredy Neptune* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998).

[74] Les Murray, 'Notes on the Writing of a Novel Sequence', *The Paperbark Tree*, p. 139.

vernacular for the concert hall as conventionally understood".[75] Of course, his manipulations of the sonnet form can be seen as a deliberate vernacular take–over of a received poetic medium, forming a parallel to Walcott's 'Tales of the Islands' or Tony Harrison's sequence *The School of Eloquence*. But despite its obvious merits —such as a good story — *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* does appear on the page as an experimental work that is formally more challenging than most of Murray's other collections. For instance, his occasional deployment of alliterated split lines — appropriated from the Old English verse tradition — draws attention to his own poetic command in a way that arguably interferes with the narrative:

> As kids are growled to keep off graves
> and veterans' eyes overflow at attention
> beneath the coffin the bars are removed
> the laid bands lengthen he is going down
> the varnish is occluded his dimensions vanish.
> (*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, p. 38.)

If we therefore choose to see his project of "reclaiming the narrative for poetry" as part of an attempt to reintroduce in the late–twentieth–century a more democratic, "unsnubbing" art–form, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* compares unfavourably with Murray's latest novel sequence *Fredy Neptune*, which appears to be more reader–friendly despite its considerable length. Spanning 255 pages, *Fredy Neptune* relays the adventures of the German–Australian sailor Fredy Boettcher. And to accommodate the vernacular flow of Fredy's yarn, Murray has come up with an unrhymed stanza–form of eight lines that follow a grammatical cadencing rather than a metrical framework — much as in 'The Buladelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle'. The outcome is a narrative rollercoaster–ride, where it is the tale itself, rather than the poetic qualities of the verse, that demands our attention:

> I let their car's brakes off and it chased him
> and made him Whee! Whee! like a pig till it veered away and crashed.
>
> I was getting faint and wobbly. We had some cotton wool
> and plugged the wound. We drove on to Warwick.
> Laura was a new hand at driving, but going well, and Joe
> was right out of his shell, making moving–picture out of
> all that had happened. *Then Mum got him down grrarrgh!*
> Laura didn't appreciate being cast as the guard dog, but Joe
> had to deal with it, she knew. *Now Mum is driving rirr–rirr.*
> The doctor in Warwick tweezed the bullet out, click! *My word,*

[75] Douglas Dunn, 'Big Man's Music: Les Murray's Metric', *Counterbalancing Light* (op. cit.), pp. 79–80.

> *you're a stoic, Mr Beecher!* We were just finishing
> our dinner when a police trooper stamped into the pub dining–room:
> *Frederick Adolph Boocher? I arrest you on charges of being*
> *an accessory to the murder of Walter Henry Colefax —*
> That sure stopped the spoons in their trifle and apple cobbler.
> Soon I was back in Brisbane. Jail food wasn't half as tasty.
> They let me sit and cool, to get me frightened, and then
> the same men who drove us to see Sir Peter collected me.
> (Book 2, *Barking at the Thunder* , p. 111.)

In the works following *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, questions of nationality and Australianness seem gradually to have given way to a wider set of interests and concerns. In fact, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* can be seen as the culmination of Murray's attempt to promote his vernacular republic, its inauguration heralded by the rite of the "common dish". Once again, the rite synthesizes the spiritual traditions of a creolised Australia. But at the same time, it also echoes a wider, transnational theme of Christian reconciliation:

> It was literature. The King. And it was the common dish.
> Do you know that dish? You will be offered it.
> Work, agony, laughter are in it; flesh and queer fish.
> You bring your own spoon. And the flavour varies a bit.
>
> Some pick, and cry that it's bitter. Some other hoe in;
> among the eaters, most things are understood;
> long–handled spoons, gold spoons, poor spoons of tin —
> Starvation and shame not to eat. Yet it's difficult food.
>
> Eaters never trust the ones who will not eat;
> (I've respected some who ate from a private bowl).
> The Buddha saw the dish, and claimed there was nothing in it,
> but Jesus, he blessed it and devoured it whole.
> (*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, p. 46.)

This shift from focussing on distinctly Australian themes, to writing a perhaps more consciously universal poetry of spirituality and religious apprehension, is also suggested by the numinous titles of *The People's Otherworld* (1983), *The Daylight Moon* (1987) and *Translations from the Natural World* (1993). It is furthermore detectable in Murray's extended discussion of poetry and religion, appearing in the 1986 essays 'Embodiment and Incarnation' and 'Poems and Poesies', as well as 'Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment' (1988). Similarly, his 'The Trade in Images' (1988) wearily addresses "the making of national images" as "a major journalistic and literary industry", and "something we do too much of" (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 295). Asked about the idea of a national literature, Murray now says:

> We needed a national literature just to break out of the great English mindset. Now we need a national literature rather less, although there are some people who can only operate on that level, while others can operate on a wider level. But then, it should be there and not condescended to (Personal Interview).

Though far from having dismissed questions of nationality as poetic subject–matter, there is a sense in which Murray's later works have broadened out, and let his Australianness serve as a "native gesture"[76] which informs his negotiations with the wider world. Clearly, this should also be seen in the light of his growing international reputation.[77] Of course, Murray's career as an Australian "Peasant Mandarin" has from the outset been consciously cosmopolitan. As we have seen, though firmly rooted in a rural Australian experience, his regionality expresses wider affiliations, drawing on a vast range of sources, and thus facilitating the idea of a universal Boeotian tradition. This also explains why he is not, in a limiting, derogatory sense, a "folk poet": while striving to be democratic and non–élitist, Murray does not shirk from cross–cultural learning and scholarship.[78] But in later years, it seems that the poet has become increasingly aware of his role as a "Peasant Mandarin" operating in an international context of Western culture. In 'Opening in England' from *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, he casts himself as a Boeotian bard, jet–lagged from a visit to the Athenian dream–factory of Hollywood:

> I only looked. Poets are nothing
> in that profit vortex. Entertainment
> and all the decorations of satiety
> were craft, but poetry was a gent
> always, regaled with gifts, not money.
> Ancient shame, to pay for love or the sacred.
> Deny the sacred, and we are owed pay.
> (*Subhuman Redneck Poems*, p. 66.)

And in *Fredy Neptune*, Murray returns as a poet to grapple with that "profit vortex" of the entertainment industry. Working his way through prohibition America as a hobo, Fredy winds up in Hollywood, earning a living as "crowd–sweller" in several films (p. 161), and mingling with "showbiz people who don't/ say what they feel...but talk to make

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[76] Les Murray, 'Poetry and Religion', *Collected Poems*, p. 172.

[77] His first book to come out in Britain and the United States was *The Vernacular Republic: Selected Poems*, published in 1982 by Canongate and Persea Books respectively. The following year, Carcanet published his *The People's Otherworld*, and have continued to publish his books for the British market ever since. Similarly, in the States Murray quickly moved from Persea to Farrar Straus.

[78] This also accounts for Murray's ambigious relationship with his Modernist precursors. Generally criticising them for introducing a mandarin type of intellectual élitism, he also concedes to a synthesizing impulse as "*the* great thing about modernism" (interview with Robert Crawford, p. 22; see also his essay 'Pound Devalued' in *The Peasant Mandarin*), as well as my discussion in Chapter 4.

themselves feel" (p. 156).

More importantly, as Robert Crawford observes, Murray's project of reclaiming the narrative for poetry in *Fredy Neptune* "isn't simply an attempt to compete with prose fiction". Instead, Murray "tries to fuse poetry with mainstream cinema", to "learn from and rechannel some of cinema's global, secular reach".[79] Given its high–voltage action and the break–neck speed of its narrative, it is proper to see the poem as a Spielbergian epic, with Fredy acting as another Indiana Jones on a quest for the Holy Grail. However, Fredy's personal odyssey has rural Australia as its starting point and spiritual base, and in the end the book comes across as a serious celebration of Boeotian values. After circumnavigating the globe and experiencing on his own body the numbing effects of modern Western civilization, Murray's action hero returns to his native region, and is restored as a social and spiritual being whose bonding with the world is achieved through prayer and forgiveness:

> Something tore on me, like bandages coming off scab and hair,
> the white tearing off me like linen. And I knew what was coming:
> Forgive God, my self said.
> I shuddered at that one. Judging Him and sensing life eternal,
> said my self, are different hearts. You want a single heart, to pray.
> Choose one and drop one. I looked inside them both
> and only one allowed prayer, so I chose it,
> and my prayer was prayed and sent, already as I chose it.
>
> Nothing happened that evening. Next morning I woke under weight.
> Our bedclothes were on me, warming me to just above the perfect
> heat I must have been at for thirty–four years.
> The bedspread was covered with like caterpillars, the clock was icy,
> stinging like a memory of cowtime buckets before dawn.
> (Book 5, *Lazarus Unstuck*, pp. 254–5.)

As a "Peasant Mandarin" seeking to redress an Athenian culture, Murray is aware that his international reputation has been furthered by the cultural changes taking place in academia over the last couple of decades. Looking back, he notes: "What gave me a big surprise was that the stuff I was writing, which was utterly "parochial" and "provincial", and every other word they have used since Athens, suddenly was widely acceptable beyond Australia." He continues:

> The universities did us one great service — not the universities in Australia, but the ones in Europe — by getting us out of being cramped in the colonial distance and into a wider readership. They took our works world–wide by creating studies in Commonwealth literature... Getting out of the Empire mindset was desperately needed (Personal Interview).

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[79] Robert Crawford, 'Hail Fredy Mercurial', *The Scotsman*, 1 August 1998, 'Books', p. 14.

But although Murray commends the universities for their continuing effort in reviewing their curricula, he is still wary of the dangers of institutionalising poetry. While the introduction of 'Commonwealth' and 'Post–Colonial Literatures' has helped to widen the scope of literary studies, he also draws attention to the dangers of deploying such labels, as they can take on too much of a political charge and ensnare writers in unproductive groupings. When asked about his view on the long–term development of 'Australian Literature' as a university subject, he says: "I'm not sure it's a complete account. I think it's leaving out so much of the evidence that it is not really an honest field to maneouvre in. There are too many proscribed names. I think somebody will denounce it, it will become unsustainable" (ibid.).

Such reservations have constantly informed his role as international broker for Australian poetry. As editor of several anthologies, his main ambition has been to rescue poetry from the clutches of an academic sub–text. Speaking in 'Embodiment and Incarnation' of his editorial work on *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* and *The Collins–Dove Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, he noted how "[m]ost anthologies nowadays use a good deal...of managerial prose to marshal and discipline the poetry they are presenting":

> Poetry as a zoo animal, as an educative workhorse, as a fuel for political Molotov cocktails, as grist to an academic or therapeutic mill — these are some of the secret functions which the very design of most modern anthologies would have our ancient art serve, often while pretending to be its protectors, preserving it like a frail endangered species in a paper Wildlife Reserve. I has decided very firmly to do all I could to counter these received views (*The Paperbark Tree*, p. 253).

As anthologist, then, Murray has like Heaney sought to give primacy to the reading experience. But if Heaney wanted his most recent anthology to be "less of a carnival, more like a cheklist",[80] Murray has remained insistent on representing his material in a non–canonical format. In *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, he argues:

> I have turned away from a recent preoccupation with grading and weighting the representation of individual poets in accordance with some idea of their relative importance... This has made it possible to present an oblique view of the poetic landscape, in which the peaks or larger hills do not obscure the smaller features.[81]

Today, Murray feels that "the war with academia is essentially over" (Personal

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80 Seamus Heaney, 'Foreword', *The Schoolbag* (op. cit.), p. xvii.

81 Les Murray, *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, Third expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 'Foreword', xxi.

Interview). What remains now, he argues, is for the publishing trade to follow suit. Reiterating concerns he voiced in *Fivefathers*, he says:

> What I regret about publishing are two main things. You still can't get published anywhere and then be distributed in the whole English–speaking world. If you're published in Australia, I think in a sensible world you should be able to sell that book from Jamaica to Zanzibar and the capitals. You can't sell a book in Britain, unless it's published by a respectable British firm. The bookshops just won't order it. And you can't distribute in America unless you're published by a respectable American firm. So there's still a monopoly operating... The other one is the lack of lateral distrubution, I mean, all of the old ex–colonies are interested in being distributed back in Britain, the old metropol. But they don't think enough about distributing in each other's countries (ibid.).

As an Australian poet with an international audience, Murray has retained his image as "Peasant Mandarin", partly acting as a broker for Australian culture, and partly as a Boeotian addressing an Athenian Western culture. Seeing himself as a defender of what is marginal and unfashionable, he has sought to enter a dialogue with what Judith Wright called "the high seats of culture and critical appraisal". At the same time, his ambition has been to reclaim poetry as a popular, democratic art–form. Resisting the orthodoxies of metropolitan, post–modern culture, Murray sees poetry as a force of reconciliation, as a holistic language which "concerts" bodily instinct and intellect, capable of affirming spiritual and cultural plenitude, while maintaining a wider sense of bonding and unity. Springing out of his "peasant" inheritance, these convictions have become central to his "civilising mission" as a mandarin.

4

Tony Harrison: An Inner Émigré

As I have noted earlier, Seamus Heaney's essay called 'Englands of the Mind' (1976) is partly an attempt to challenge the idea of a central, homogeneous tradition of English poetry. By focusing on the works of Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin, Heaney seeks to illustrate how a growing sense of regional diversity in English–language literature is not just connected to the cultural blossoming of the former colonies after the Empire. This diversity, he finds, has also begun to manifest itself more affirmatively in the writings coming out of England herself. Commenting on Hughes, Hill and Larkin, he says:

> I believe they are afflicted with a sense of history that was once the peculiar affliction of the poets of other nations who were not themselves natives of England but who spoke the English language. The poets of the mother culture, I feel, are now possessed of that defensive love of their territory which was once shared only by those poets whom we might call colonial.[1]

The sense of history which Heaney has in mind is the nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus was trying to awake, and which Walcott describes in 'The Schooner *Flight*', when Shabine exclaims "I met History once, but he ain't recognize me";[2] essentially, it is a sense of history brought on by an Anglocentric cultural hegemony. But the emergence of a certain image of Englishness which in the course of Empire was deployed as a yard stick for cultural sophistication and supremacy[3] did not only relegate non–English colonials to an inferior status. It also suppressed several strands of England's own historical and cultural make–up, and has in effect threatened to marginalise the experience of many of its native people.

It is from this point of view that Heaney turns to Hughes, Hill and Larkin, seeing them as three post–war exemplars whose works are driven by a desire to preserve some of those "indigenous traditions" (p. 151) which have been endangered by a unifying notion of English culture. Throughout his essay he concentrates largely on questions of region, and borrows T. S. Eliot's concept of the auditory imagination to trace hidden

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1 Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations*, pp. 150–1.

2 Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948–1984*, p. 350.

3 See for instance Lord Thomas Macaulay's famous 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), *The Post–Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995),pp. 428–30.

vernacular energies in their poetry. However, in his discussion of Hill, Heaney also notes how those indigenous traditions which have been muted by History are intimately linked with issues of class. Considering Hill's collection from 1971, *Mercian Hymns*, he points to the book's historical concern with the exploitation of labour, citing these lines from XXV: "I speak this in/ memory of my grandmother whose childhood and prime/ womanhood were spent in the nailer's darg."[4] According to Heaney, the poet is here "celebrating his own indomitable Englishry, casting his mind on other days, singing a clan beaten into the clay and ashes, and linking their patience, their sustaining energy with the glory of England" (ibid.).

In this essay, Heaney centres Geoffrey Hill's 'England of the mind' around his native West Midlands inheritance. But as Romana Huk has indicated in a recent study, Hill's concern with class issues also links him to a north of England regional sensibility.[5] During the 1950s and 1960s, Hill worked as a lecturer at Leeds University, where he became associated with a group of poets that included Jon Silkin, Jeffrey Wainwright and Tony Harrison. A central gathering point for these poets was the literary journal *Stand*, which was instigated by Silkin and which, as Huk notes, "drew its considerable energies from the charged leftist spirit of its industrial, working–class backdrop".[6] Obviously, this merely corroborates Heaney's point about regionality, but it is a link worth noting. As I have already suggested, 'Englands of the Mind' implicitly gestures towards a wider group of post–war poets, not least Tony Harrison, to whom History has also presented itself as a nightmare which threatens to silence his native culture of working–class Leeds. Especially *The School of Eloquence*, his ever–expanding sonnet sequence, has been devoted to "breaking the silence" and commemorating "[t]he dumb [who] go down in history and disappear".[7]

This concern with silence–breaking is something we normally associate with a post–colonial cultural debate, as seen for instance in the theoretical writings of Gayatri

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[4] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 163; the quote is from Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, 'XXV', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1985)).

[5] Romana Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual: Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, and the Poets of Postwar Leeds', in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, eds. James Acheson & Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 175–219.

[6] Ibid., p. 175.

[7] Tony Harrison, 'Working' and 'National Trust', *Selected Poems*, New Expanded Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 124 & 121. In the following, Harrison's poems will be quoted with page reference to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

Chakravorty Spivak.[8] In the following I intend to look at Harrison's role as an English poet who, given his North of England working–class background, has faced similar challenges to those experienced by writers coming from the wider geographical margins of the former British Empire. Examining his works from his earliest student poems to his latest collection, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, I will trace his perceived literary affiliations, and consider how he has come to view his own poetic medium. A central point of discussion will be how Harrison's Englishness seems to have complicated his attitude towards a poetic tradition in ways that Heaney, Walcott and Murray may have outgrown. In this connection I will be questioning Rosemary Burton's assertion that "[a]t a time when few poets write formally, metrically and in rhyme, Harrison has found a way to rehabilitate such suspect techniques and to reconcile formality with the rhythms of everyday speech."[9] But to begin with, I will be looking at the formative years during which Harrison approached a literary culture and began to forge links.

Born in 1937, Tony Harrison won at the age of eleven what he has called "one of six scholarships for the plebs"[10] to attend the posh Leeds Grammar School. The scholarship was a direct result of the Butler Education Act, which had been passed by the Government in 1944. Its official aim was to ameliorate the growing social polarisation in Britain, by giving a select number of bright working–class children an unprecedented opportunity to go on to secondary school, and eventually further to university. As I have noted before, it formed part of a larger scheme in which 'Education, Education, Education' seemed to be the order of the day: in 1947, the Butler Act was followed by the almost identical Northern Ireland Education Act, from which Heaney benefitted. And similarly, in 1943 the Asquith Commission was appointed with a view to establishing tertiary institutions in the colonies.

Still, over the years the social consequences of the Butler Act have been the focus of much debate. Thus, in his *English Poetry Since 1940* Neil Corcoran speaks of its

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[8] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988). See also 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World', in Spivak's *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988).

[9] Rosemary Burton, 'Tony Harrison: An Introduction', in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), p. 14. This anthology is hereafter cited as *Astley*.

[10] Tony Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa', an autobiographical introduction written for an anthology in 1971, *Corgy Modern Poets in Focus: 4*; reprinted in *Astley*, p. 33.

"disintegrative ambivalent benefits for the working class".[11] More radically, Ken Worpole's essay 'Scholarship Boy: The Poetry of Tony Harrison' argues that the Act was devised by the pre–Labour Coalition Government to stall the growth of a socialist proletariat–based movement in Britain. But while the aim had been the *embourgeoisement* of a select group of intellectually promising working–class children, the effect was one of displacement, with the children being "estranged from their own families...and disinherited from their political and cultural traditions".[12] Such criticism generally draws on the personal accounts of those working–class children who were given the opportunity of further schooling.[13] Harrison's works also keep returning to the double sense of displacement which his experience as a scholarship boy entailed. At school his accent would give away his social background, marking him as a barbarian who should not be permitted to read poetry aloud. As his English teacher is reported to have said in the first sonnet of 'Them & [uz]' from *The School of Eloquence*:

> 'Can't have our glorious heritage done to death!'
>
> .....
>
> 'Poetry's the speech of kings. You're one of those
> Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 122.)

Meanwhile, his education is seen as having caused a rift between the boy and his working–class parents. Recalling a summer holiday at Blackpool in the second poem of 'Illuminations', the uniting image of the family "holding hands/ gripping the pier machine that gave you shocks" is disturbed by the poet's own hindsight: "That was the first year on my scholarship/ and I'd be the one who'd make that circuit short."

> I lectured them on neutrons and Ohm's Law
> and other half–baked Physics I'd been taught.
> I'm sure my father felt I was a bore!
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 147.)

Before attending Leeds Grammar School, Harrison had already taken an interest in

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11 Neil Corcoran, 'Barbarians and Rhubarbarians — Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison', *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 158.

12 Ken Worpole, 'Scholarship Boy: The Poetry of Tony Harrison', *Astley*, p. 61.

13 See for instance David Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), and Ronald Goldman (ed.), *Breakthrough: Autobiographical Accounts of the Education of Some Socially Disadvantaged Children* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968). See also Richard Hoggart's early study of working–class culture, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957; London: Penguin Books, 1958), which was partly inspired by his own experience as a working–class child from Leeds.

books and literature. In his interview with Richard Hoggart he notes how he started writing "traditional heroic stories...about Nelson, Drake and all such things" at the age of seven,[14] and in his autobiographical piece 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa' he recalls:

> In our street in Hoggarty, Leeds, I was the only one who used his literacy to read books, the only 'scholar', and so every kind of cultural throwaway from spring-cleaned attics and the cellars of the deceased found its way to me. I acquired piles of old 78s, George Formby, the Savoy Orpheans, Sophie Tucker, Sandy Powell, Peter Dawson, and sometimes the odd book, an old guide to Matlock, the *Heckmondwike Temperance Hymnal* stamped *Not To Be Taken Away*, and, above all, a Livingstone's *Travels* so massive I could barely manhandle it. Somehow it seems that my two early ambitions to be Dr. Livingstone and George Formby, were compromised in the role of the poet, half missionary, half comic, Bible and banjolele, the Renaissance *ut doceat*, *ut placeat* (*Astley*, p. 33).

Similarly, 'Next Door, I' from *The School of Eloquence* pays tribute to a neighbour who gave the 'scholar' boy a copy of *The Kipling Treasury* when he was nine years old (*Selected Poems*, p. 129). It is significant that in his conversation with Hoggart, Harrison speaks of his early impression that "the central literary life was somewhere else" (*Astley*, p. 40), that it did not and could not incorporate his own native Leeds experience. As we have seen before, this is a common experience among regional or colonial writers of his generation. It chimes for instance with Heaney's recollection of his first encounter with poetry in school, and his feeling that "the literary language, the civilized utterance from the classic canon of English poetry...did not re-echo our own speech".[15] But at the same time, the way in which Harrison's boyhood fascination for the heroic was being nurtured by a British popular culture centered around images of Empire and the war, also echoes Heaney's childhood memories of books involving "explorers in cork helmets and 'savages', with illustrations of war canoes on a jungle river" (ibid., p. 21), and of sitting with his ears glued to the wireless speaker to follow detective serials about British special agents, or radio adaptations of the adventures of Biggles.[16]

Looking back on his early aspirations to become a writer, Harrison notes that when he transferred to Leeds Grammar School, he "shelved being a poet a bit", partly because his friends "thought it a bit cissy", and partly because his parents thought that "too much application to books was unhealthy" (Hoggart, p. 40). Obviously, the English teacher's dismissal of his accent must also have contributed, although another teacher was more

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14 Richard Hoggart, 'In Conversation with Tony Harrison', recorded by TVS for the ITV network's *Writers on Writing* series in 1986; reprinted in *Astley*, pp. 39–40. (This interview subsequently cited as 'Hoggart'.)

15 Seamus Heaney, 'Mossbawn', *Preoccupations*, p. 26.

16 Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p. 10.

encouraging, and "used to get me modern poetry from the library" (ibid.). If the English classes generally contributed to Harrison's sense of distance between his own language and a central literary heritage, he also recalls one Classics teacher who was "engaged in a campaign to keep all colloquial language out of the translations his pupils were required to do from Latin or Greek".[17] On several occasions, Harrison tells of one particular incident where he had to translate a passage from Latin, in which some official was moving a group of people on in a crowded street:

> My translation went something like: 'Move along there!' true to constabulary vernacular. I do remember that this was crossed out with a heavy red pen and the alternative I was offered in the margin by the teacher was: 'Vacate the thoroughfare!'[18]

The incident illustrates a central dilemma of denying the colloquial roots of all written language. Elsewhere Harrison has commented on how English grammar schools were "founded within the belief that English couldn't measure up to Latin", adding: "Within that there are all kinds of gradations that certain kinds of English can't measure up to other kinds and so on".[19] His poem 'Classics Society', which commemorates the fourth centenary of Leeds Grammer School, also gives vent to "some of the frustrations I had as a working class boy with a Leeds accent translating upper–class English into patrician Latin and vice versa"[20] :

> We boys can take old Hansards and translate
> the British Empire into SPQR
> but nothing demotic or too up–to–date,
> and *not* the English that I speak at home.
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 120.)

Nevertheless, despite this élitist view of literature Harrison was far from being put off poetry. In 'Facing Up to the Muses', he recalls that

> it seemed to me then that the greatest gift that I could acquire for myself was the gift of articulation, the treasure of eloquence, the power over words, the power of words. I had a hunger, an appetite for all modes of articulation, for English and for other languages...and above all a hunger for that supreme form of articulation, the highest eloquence, poetry (*Astley*, pp. 436–7).

17 Tony Harrison, 'Facing Up to the Muses', his Presidential Address to the Classical Association, delivered on 12 April 1988 at the University of Bristol, and subsequently published in *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, 85, 1988; reprinted in *Astley*, p. 437.

18 Ibid. See also 'Jane Eyre's Sister', his preface to *The Misanthrope* (London: Rex Collins, 1973), reprinted in *Astley*, p. 139; and his interview with Hoggart, pp. 40–1.

19 Tony Harrison, interview with Michael Alexander, in *Talking Verse: Interviews with Poets*, eds. Robert Crawford, Henry Hart, David Kinloch & Richard Price (St. Andrews/ Williamsburgh, VA: *Verse*, 11.3 & 12.1, 1995), p. 86. (This interview hereafter cited as 'Alexander'.)

20 Tony Harrison, 'Facing Up to the Muses', *Astley*, p. 437

'Classics Society' also reveals how he worked "the hardest in his class at his translation", a phrase alluding to the boy's own "translation" into a written word culture. And even when *The School of Eloquence* deals with the sense of displacement that this process causes, the gift of eloquence is never rejected. In 'Wordlists', for instance, although Harrison notes how, between "[w]ords and wordlessness.../ the gauge went almost ga–ga", the concluding line is a savouring of ancient Greek and Latin: "come glossolalia, dolciloqui" (*Selected Poems*, p. 117). Similarly, in 'Facing Up to the Muses', after describing the traumas of being a scholarship boy, he goes on to mourn the demise of a curriculum in which Greek and Latin were taught as the central foundation of a Western literary tradition:

> However galling it would be at times, the fact is that I learned ancient Greek, and the sad thing about the New National Curriculum is that no one from my kind of background especially, with my kind of hunger and appetite for language, will have the chance to make his own way to those founding models of European eloquence (*Astley*, p. 439).

This clearly echoes the pride voiced by other post–war regional writers such as Heaney and Walcott, who, while being up against an Anglocentric cultural hegemony, have benefitted from a classical education passed on by the Empire. Behind Harrison's statement is a traditional, mandarin view of poetry as a refined mode of articulation which draws sustenance from a formal classical heritage. This should not be seen to contradict his frequent and sharp criticism of the way his grammar school teachers taught their pupils to "turn once living authors into a form of English never spoken by men or women".[21] But it does shed light on the manner in which Harrison's poetry — like Walcott's — often seems to *negotiate* between, rather than *reconcile*, poetic form and vernacular speech. This is perhaps a subtle, but nevertheless important, aspect of his voice to which I will return later.

Finishing secondary school in 1954, Harrison went on to the University of Leeds where he enrolled for a degree in Classics. After completing his BA Honours in 1958, he took a diploma in Linguistics and then began to do research for a Ph.D. on English verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid*. While a longer article based on his research was later published,[22] Harrison did not finish the degree. Still, the years he spent at Leeds

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21 Tony Harrison, 'Jane Eyre's Sister', *Astley*, p. 139.

22 Tony Harrison, 'English Virgil: The *Aeneid* in the XVIII Century', *Philologica Pragensia*, X, 1967, pp. 1–11 & 80–91.

University were to be a crucial time for him. The 1950s was a period in which the cultural scene in Leeds began to flourish. And a central gathering point was the English Department, which was headed at the time by Bonamy Dobrée, who according to Romana Huk saw it as his mission to "diversify opinion", both academically as well as in the wider community.[23] One of his main contributions had been to set up the Gregory Fellowship, which brought various artists and poets to the university, among them Thomas Blackburn, John Heath–Stubbs and John Silkin. The teaching staff also included, as noted before, Geoffrey Hill, and among Harrison's fellow students were people like Jeffrey Wainwright, James Simmons from Northern Ireland, and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria.

Though based in the Classics Department, Harrison soon took an active part in this environment. Most important, perhaps, was his affiliation with *Poetry & Audience*, a poetry magazine produced by students at the English Department since 1953.[24] It was here that his first poems appeared, and between 1959–60, while a graduate student, he further acted as its editor. Revealing his strong interest in a classical heritage, the thirty or so pieces which he submitted to the journal between 1957–61 are a mixture of translations from Greek and Latin and original poems. Looking back on these early writings, Harrison speaks in terms of learning a trade, saying: "The idea of becoming a master of something, of learning skills, was very important to me, and partly to show off to *them*" (Alexander, p. 84) — the "*them*" referring to his former teachers at Leeds Grammar School. Fuelled by what he now describes as a sense of slow–burning revenge, his early ambition was to access the word–culture from which he felt relegated, and "make things that were classically formed", but at the same time written "in my own voice" (Hoggart, p. 40). However, the need for formal mastery also grew out of a wish to reconcile his poetry with a working–class inheritance. In his conversation with Michael Alexander, Harrison adds that he "wanted it to be real work — in the sense that my father's work was real work" (p. 84). This notion of the poet as a craftsman is something Harrison has always stressed, speaking along the same lines as Heaney did in his early poems 'Digging' and 'Follower'. In the opening passage of *v.*, for instance,

> ...you'll have to search quite hard
> to find my slab behind the family dead,

23 Romana Huk, 'Tony Harrison, *The Loiners*, and the 'Leeds Renaissance'', *Astley*, p. 76.

24 Two anthologies based on works from *Poetry & Audience* were later to appear: A.R. Mortimer & James Simmons (eds.), *Out on the Edge* (Leeds: Leeds University, 1958), and A.R. Mortimer et al. (eds.), *Poetry & Audience 1953–60: An Anthology* (Leeds: Leeds University, 1961). The first includes six, and the latter four poems by Harrison.

> butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard
> adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.
>
> With Byron three graves on I'll not go short
> of company, and Wordsworth's opposite.
> That's two peers already, of a sort.
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 236.)

The twist here is that the peers referred to are not their famous namesakes, but local tradesmen: "Wordsworth built church organs, Byron tanned/ luggage cowhide in the age of steam".[25]

Given this notion of poetry as a craft, it is not surprising that an awareness of metre plays a prominent role in the student pieces Harrison published in *Poetry & Audience*. Particularly his frequent translations from Sappho can be seen as short exercises in creating rhythmical cadences that echo the original fragments. For instance, 'No. 112', which merely reads: "Whiter than an egg by far",[26] establishes a simple interplay between trochaic and iambic feet. Similarly, 'No. 63' — "Oh Adonis!"[27] — seeks with its [əʊ]–sounds to reconcile the length–based metre of ancient Greek with the stress–based metre of English. These observations may seem trivial, but they do shed light on some basic practices that mark Harrison's early voice. For instance, the combination of length–based and stress–based metres also occurs in another piece, 'An Appeal to the Sibyl' (this time a translation from Latin), which appeared in the same issue as 'No. 63'. Here we have phrases like "Whine like wounded bees" and "Faltering round the moaning maze".[28] In a recent essay, Desmond Graham has identified the same interplay between stress and long vowel sounds in 'The Flat Dweller's Revolt', another early Harrison piece from *Poetry & Audience*.[29] In addition, this poem also explores the rhythmic changes between trochaic and iambic feet, as in the opening line: "Dogs in mangers feel, he

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25 Ibid. Similarly, in the Preface to his version of the Northern Mystery Plays, *The Mysteries* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), Harrison says of his co–operation with the National Theatre that he had offered himself "as a Yorkshire poet who came to read the metre".

26 'No. 112', fragment by Sappho, translated by Tony Harrison (signed 'T.W.H.'), *Poetry & Audience*, 5.8, 6 December 1957, p. 1.

27 'No. 63' (suggested title: 'She retrains the Beloved'), fragment by Sappho, translated by Tony Harrison (signed 'T.W.H.'), *Poetry & Audience*, 5.6, 22 November 1957, p. 1.

28 Tony Harrison, 'An Appeal to the Sibyl' ("ipsa canas oro"), ibid., p. 6.

29 Desmond Graham, 'The Best Poet of 1961', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandy Burne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 34–5. 'The Flat Dweller's Revolt' first appeared in *Poetry & Audience*, 8.9, 10 March 1961.

thought, like this".[30]

These early verses from *Poetry & Audience* illustrate how Harrison started as a Classical rather than a straightforwardly 'English' poet, beginning literally as a translator before going on to write so much about social translation. As a poet he seemed driven at this stage by an intuitive understanding that by exploring a classical material, he would slowly begin to forge his own twentieth–century North of England voice. His translations from Sappho generally strive for a colloquial force, while his first poem — published in January 1957 — is significantly titled 'When Shall I Tune My 'Doric Reed'?'. It begins:

> These fumbling mistrals, cymbal sharp and sudden,
> Recklessly trundled from No–man's North,
> Grind in a frozen list the cindered wood's deep tree,
> As green diapason shrivels into tinsel horns...[31]

The loss or lack of voice implied in these lines is subsequently reiterated in images of trees "[l]ike unstrung bows" and the phrase "This is unsinging cold". In the final stanza, however, the bard states his intent:

> Until Manhood end, like Ixion I ride the year
> Beyond the gaslit confines of a Boy's blind archery,
> Waiting for the canopy of days to prove
> That once in the dolphin's time I need not fear,
> When, at last, this blasted olive's stump reshoots from fire
> And in a shrunken wilderness of myth becomes my love.

As was also the case with early Heaney and Walcott, this poem reveals the overpowering stylistic influence of Dylan Thomas, an aural impact which clearly comes between the poet and his own North of England vernacular inheritance. Paradoxically, this merely underlines the thematic concern of the poem. Exploring an ancient conflict between Doric and Attic Greek, Harrison has sought to reflect his own experience of having been relegated by a standardised word–culture of English. A similar concern with the fate of the Doric vernacular in classical Greece informs another poem, which appeared five months later under the title 'Plato Might Have Said': "what Plato might have said/ In birdfoot Greek,/ You sang with all the brainless eagles/ Of your loose and dying mouth."[32]

This way of linking present–day vernacular issues with a classical heritage echoes

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30 Ibid, p. 33. As Graham points out, the same shift from falling into rising patterns can be found in some of Harrison's later works, such as 'Book Ends, I' from *The School of Eloquence*, which begins "Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead" (*Selected Poems*, p. 126).

31 Tony Harrison, 'When Shall I Tune My 'Doric Reed'?', *Poetry & Audience*, 4.11, 25 January 1957, pp. 7–8.

32 Tony Harrison, 'Plato Might Have Said', *Poetry & Audience*, 4.22, 24 May 1957, pp. 4–5.

Les Murray's use of Boeotia as a model for non–metropolitan writers, and is something which Harrison has explored further throughout his career. His *U. S. Martial*, for instance, renders the Latin verses of Marcus Valerius Martialis into contemporary New York City slang.[33] More notable, perhaps, are his translations of the fourth–century Alexandrian poet Palladas into English.[34] In the preface to *Palladas: Poems*, Harrison notes:

> Palladas...is generally regarded as the last poet of Paganism, and it is in this role that I have sought to present a consistent dramatic personality... His are the last hopeless blasts of the old Hellenistic world, giving way reluctantly, but without much resistance, before the cataclysm of Christianity (ibid., p. 8).

In a recent study of Harrison, Joe Kelleher describes these translations as "an archaelogical project", finding that despite the occasional use of contemporary English slang, Palladas' paganism is "obsolete...a ghost in our world".[35] He continues: "This sense of exhumation is elaborated by Harrison littering his version with Anglo–Saxonisms that are already non–current in our own vernacular" (p. 25). As an example, Kelleher cites these lines: "Life's a performance. Either join in/ lightheartedly, or thole the pain" (*Selected Poems*, p. 77). As we have already seen, "thole" is an Old English word also used by Heaney in 'The Sounds of Rain' from *Seeing Things*, and is indeed still current in the vernacular of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Yorkshire. Nevertheless, Kelleher finds that "that old word for 'suffer' speaks a belligerent old–fashionedness both of vernacular and attitude" (*Kelleher*, p. 25). The point that Kelleher seems to be missing is that Harrison has deliberately uses Palladas to dramatise the struggle of a vernacular culture that is in the process of being relegated, and to dramatise it as a historically and culturally universal struggle. Furthermore, by using a text from *The Greek Anthology* Harrison seeks to puncture the myth of a classical word–culture that was homogenous and pure,[36] an historical misconception which has been nurtured alongside notions of a standardised, 'proper' English.

In the course of his career, an understanding of the Western literary heritage as

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33 Tony Harrison, *U. S. Martial* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books,1981).

34 Most of these translations initially appeared in Peter Jay's edition of *The Greek Anthology* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), but they were later collected and published independently by Harrison in *Palladas: Poems* (London: Anvil Press, 1975).

35 Joe Kelleher, *Writers and their Work: Tony Harrison* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), p. 24. (Hereafter cited as *Kelleher*.)

36 A parallel to this is the way in which Seamus Heaney takes issue with Eliot's portrayal of Dante as the representative of a pure, ecclesiastical and universal Latin. As I have shown in chapter 2, Heaney's Dante is a regional poet, whose tongue is a strong Tuscan vernacular.

being metamorphic rather than monolithic has been central to Harrison's retranslations of classic plays for the contemporary theatre. Commenting for instance on his own modernised versions of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, he notes: "I believe that a "classic" needs to be retranslated continuously. It seems to me that one could do worse than treat a translation as one does decor or production as endlessly renewable."[37] This belief is one that gathered momentum while Harrison was still a student at Leeds University. Speaking to John Haffenden, he recalls: "At the time when I was being pushed to finish a Ph.D. on the verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, I saw the relativity of translation... We think that Milton used classical texts as a revolutionary, and that the Victorians used them for Tory mythology, and yet they often used the same texts."[38] Harrison's lengthy research article on English translations of the *Aeneid* also deals with the ways in which the shifting political climate in seventeenth– and eighteenth–century England deeply affected Virgil's place in the classical canon, with "the tendency in each age to posit in the great literature of the past what it wishes to find in the literature of the present".[39] Later, in 'Molière Nationalised', Harrison was to broach these concerns again, comparing John Ogilby's two translations of the *Aeneid* — from 1649 and 1654 respectively — and arguing how the events leading up to the execution of Charles I had "shocked him into a fresh appraisal of a complex poem", making his second version "far more explicitly Royalist...than the first" (*Astley*, p. 144). Among the other translations included in his research project were those of Dryden and Gavin Douglas, for which he had taught himself Middle Scots.[40] While Harrison's poetry has been formally influenced by Dryden, whom he refers to as "one of my masters and mentors in the art of the couplet"[41] , Douglas's rendering of Virgil's classical text into Middle Scots must clearly have affirmed his belief in the potential of a vernacular tradition. In his prologue, Douglas began by considering the problems of translations, and strongly defended his use of Scots, "to mak it braid and plane,/ Kepand na sudron bot our awyn langage,/ And spekis as I lernyt quhen I was page".[42]

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37 Tony Harrison, 'Molière Nationalised', *Gambit: International Theatre Review*, 6.23; reprinted in *Astley*, p. 144.

38 Tony Harrison, interview with John Haffenden, *Poetry Review*, 73.4, January 1984; reprinted in *Astley*, p. 245. (This interview hereafter cited as Haffenden.)

39 Tony Harrison, 'English Virgil: The *Aeneid* in the XVIII Century', p. 81.

40 See Rosemary Burton, 'Tony Harrison: An Introduction', *Astley*, p. 18.

41 Tony Harrison, 'Jane Eyre's Sister', *Astley*, p. 139.

42 Gavin Douglas, 'The Proloug of the First Buke of Eneados', in *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English 1380–1980*, ed. Roderick Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 108.

Still, to return to Harrison's early student verses, it is clear that he had not yet managed to tune his 'Doric' reed. Many of the poems published in *Poetry & Audience* tend to lapse into a rather stilted and archaic syntax, typically dictated by the regular pulse of the metre. Thus, in 'Cave', "light/ Can hardly enter or the slightest fan/ Of air disturb", and "We run...racing each/ The other to see the wonder there".[43] However, occasionally a more contemporary note makes itself heard. In 'When Shall I Tune My 'Doric Reed'?', for instance, the classical mode is tempered by phrases like "the gaslit confines of a Boy's blind archery", "life leap[ing] in venal fits", and "Limp old myths" "from Dog–day's gutted soul" (op. cit.). As noted before, Harrison had been introduced to modern poetry by one of his teachers at Leeds Grammar School. And these lines clearly also reveal a debt to T. S. Eliot's blending of classical mythology and a twentieth–century idiom. Furthermore, in his conversation with Michael Alexander, Harrison recalls his early admiration for the way Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* called the bluff of an artificial, Latinate English, and for "what he did with classical literature" in general (pp. 83 & 88).

And yet, if Harrison had been looking at the way the Modernists 'retranslated' a classical heritage into the twentieth century, he also quickly developed a degree of scepticism towards certain aspects of their works. Despite his admiration he soon came to regard Pound as a "warning example", because "[y]ou can tell...in his [later] works that he wasn't talking to anybody but himself" (ibid.). Behind this lies a sense that Modernism has brought about a tradition of writing that is essentially solipsistic and uncommunicative. When acting as editor of *Poetry & Audience*, Harrison launched an attack against the "camp followers of post–humous Modernity, who make it a virtue of their poetry that it employs neat and daring typographical devices".[44] And in a review article from the same period, he further warned against adopting a too élitist stance that threatens to exclude certain readers, as exemplified by "the type of mandarinism" found in an unashamedly learned poet like T. S. Eliot.[45] Such reservations have often been voiced by other post–Empire regional writers as well. Les Murray, for instance, praises Modernism for its synthesising impulse and "admission of a wide range of vernacular speech",[46] but also finds that "Eliot and Pound were in flight from equality...towards an

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43 Tony Harrison, 'Cave', *Poetry & Audience*, 5.14, 28 February 1958, p. 5.

44 Tony Harrison, 'Editorial', *Poetry & Audience*, 7.1, 1959, p. 2.

45 Tony Harrison, 'G.W. Ireland: His Poetry', review, *Poetry & Audience*, 6.13, 6 February 1959, p.1.

46 Les Murray, interview with Robert Crawford, *Verse*, 3.1, 1986, p. 22.

ideal of high culture":

> They ensured that, in the English speaking world more than anywhere else, the appeal of poetry would be to a self–consciously intellectual audience, with consequent atrophy of its appeal to readers of any other kind. They, more than anyone else, made a certain slangy–mandarin tone dominant in poetry, though Eliot did, in later life, retreat from the colloquial and make his tone more traditionally mandarin.[47]

To Harrison, adopting an élitist stance would obviously constitute a betrayal of his own uneducated working–class background. However, wishing at the same time to be part of a Western tradition of eloquence has problematised the poet's need to dissociate himself altogether from the mandarin tendencies found in Eliot and Pound. In an interview with Clive Wilmer, Harrison admits that "I was educated in that tradition", but goes on to describe his quotations from non–literary persons in *The School of Eloquence* as an attempt to create "a deliberate contrast to the kind of poetry which bolstered itself up with quotations from...Latin, Greek or Sanskrit".[48] Still, the sequence also uses in its epigraph a passage from Milton's Latin poem 'Ad Patrem', carrying, as Neil Corcoran points out, "a whole freight of European literary and cultural tradition, but [carrying] it exclusively, for those with the privilege of education".[49] While Corcoran sees this as "a lesson to the usual reader...in the alienation, incapacity and anxiety which the use of any language may involve for those not privy to its class and cultural encodings", the quotation is nevertheless also a genuine homage to one of Harrison's poetic forefathers.

In a review which appeared in *Stand* in 1960, the young Harrison commented further on what he saw as one of the more unfortunate after–effects of Modernism discernible in contemporary English poetry:

> When T. S. Eliot spoke of experience as a 'heap of broken images' he described what is now a common awareness of life and history. A typical instrument of that awareness is the short poem, no longer necessarily lyrical, that dominates English poetry today. This fragmentation of experience perpetuates the short poem, and the short poem, in its way, perpetuates the fragmentation of experience. The English poetic mind, instead of enlarging itself, like the pearl, on the formless mass surrounding it, seems almost universally impelled to reproduce amoeba fashion and dissipate its images in effortless variations of itself... There seems to be a fear of growth, a lack of nucleus, an acceptance of means for ends, of fragments for wholes, a repetitious collection of notes that no–one dare enlarge upon.[50]

While his early student works seem to have been informed by Eliot's use of classical

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47 Les Murray, 'Pound Devalued', *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose*, pp. 16–7.

48 Tony Harrison, interview with Clive Wilmer, in Clive Wilmer's *Poets Talking: Poet of the Month Interviews from BBC Radio 3* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), p. 100.

49 Neil Corcoran, 'Barbarians and Rhubarbarians', *English Poetry Since 1940*, p. 159.

50 Tony Harrison, 'Some Men Are Brothers', review of D. J. Enright, *Stand*, 4.4, 1960–1961, p. 49.

fragments, Harrison's artistic impulse has been to create new wholes out of the inherited 'heap of broken images', to seek to encompass and arguably redress a sense of cultural fragmentation rather than perpetuating it. Already in his early translation 'An Appeal to the Sibyl', the poet was concerned with the transitoriness of a Sibyl's prophetic verses, which acccording to classical mythology were written on leaves:

> For each holy word
> You mark on foliage,
> A sap exudes which, with its fatal scent
> Allures the fatal insect on,
> A black abiding thing,
> Which leaves there for your later rage
> Ragged sinews in your page.[51]

But in the end, although "prophecy/ Recorded dies in you," "venom to renew remains/ Weaving verses round the veins". As to his early translations of Sappho, Harrison furthermore says: "I was drawn to the fact that it was just fragments, but you could actually reconstruct the stanzaic form just by the rhythmical fragment that you had" (Alexander, p. 82). Central to this statement is his awareness of metre as a healing force, as the vehicle for textual and cultural reconstitution. It is therefore not surprising, perhaps, that Harrison has developed into one of the major contemporary practitioners of the long poem.

In her discussions of Tony Harrison and the 'Leeds Renaissance', Romana Huk has illustrated how his early appeal for a poetry that is communicative and enlarging rather than fragmented may also be linked to the wider political and cultural ideas which overtook provincial Leeds in the 1950s and early 1960s.[52] Given its industrial working–class backdrop and the concomitantly high number of 'scholarship boys' attending the university, the intellectual climate was greatly influenced by the 'New Left' movement. Among the student magazines which emerged were titles such as *Left Wing* and *Marxist*, and the cultural debate was generally marked by questions of 'commitment'. In his 1952–53 Clark Lectures, Bonamy Dobrée addressed the prevailing absence of "great public themes" in contemporary poetry,[53] and similar issues found a platform through Jon Silkin's revived literary journal *Stand*. As Huk notes: "The problems of (as well as desire for) commitment certainly informed the broad editorial policy of *Stand*...the

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51 Tony Harrison, 'An Appeal to the Sibyl', *Poetry & Audience*, 5.6, 22 November 1957, p. 6.

52 Romana Huk, 'Tony Harrison, *The Loiners*, and the 'Leeds Renaissance'', *Astley*. See also Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual' (op. cit.).

53 Bonamy Dobrée, *The Broken Cistern* (London: Cohen and West, 1954); cited by Huk in 'Poetry of the Committed Individual', p. 200.

magazine was set up to "take a stand", to publish what Silkin called *Poetry of the Committed Individual* (the title of his 1973 Penguin anthology of work from *Stand*)" (*Astley*, p. 78).

Furthermore, the intellectual climate in Leeds was marked by an international atmosphere. Like other British universities at the time, Leeds attracted students from the colonies, such as Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, giving the campus a cosmopolitan profile. And when Norman Jeffares arrived from Australia in 1957 to take over the chair of the English Department, he was intent on continuing the visionary work of Dobrée, and soon established Britain's first postgraduate course on Commonwealth Literature. An annual visiting fellowship to be held by a writer or academic from a Commonwealth country was set up, and the library began to build up its holdings in the field. In his autobiographical essay, 'The How and the Wherefore', Jeffares recalls:

> The postgraduate school attracted students from many countries: they gained a great deal from meeting and getting to know each other, and the courses in Commonwealth literature opened the eyes of many (not least the British) to the scope of literature written in English outside the UK, and to the role in various Commonwealth countries of literature in defining cultural identity.[54]

But if Leeds attracted people from abroad, there was also, Jeffares notes, an outward movement: "we encouraged members of staff to hold positions overseas on secondment, largely in Africa" (p. 98). In fact, already in 1956 Michael Banham had moved to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria to work as a lecturer. And, as Robert Fraser shows in his illuminating study *West African Poetry: A Critical History*, thanks to Banham a link between Ibadan and Leeds was forged: inspired by the *Poetry & Audience* venture, he soon saw the need for a similar magazine in Nigeria, and encouraged his students to start one.[55] Two years later — in 1958 — the first issue of *The Horn* appeared, and the journal continued to appear regularly until 1962.

As a student Harrison would have heard about these things, either through *Poetry & Audience*, where the launch of *The Horn* was announced, or via his friend and fellow poet Wole Soyinka, who began sending poems back to Nigeria for publication in the late

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[54] A. Norman Jeffares, 'The How and the Wherefore', in *Teaching Post–Colonialism and Post–Colonial Literatures*, eds. Anne Collett, Lars Jensen & Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press), p. 97. Jeffares furthermore set up the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, which held its first conference at Leeds University in 1962, the proceedings of which were subsequently published in John Press (ed.), *Commonwealth Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1965).

[55] Robert Fraser, 'Poetry and the University', *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

1950s.[56] In 1962, Harrison went to Nigeria himself to lecture at the Ahmadu Bello University, and stayed there until 1966. As he recalls, his four years in Africa helped him to see his own native experience in a wider perspective:

> I found the drama of my own education dramatically posed in black and white: people coming from illiterate backgrounds and reading about Wordsworth's daffodils because it was set in their exam papers, when they didn't know what a fucking daffodil was. There was an almost surrealistic perversity about 'O' Level questions, which were set by a board in England for African students. That kind of dichotomy made me think about my own education (Haffenden, p. 236).

Thus Harrison was also introduced to a literary climate that struggled with similar problems to those he had, drawing on an Anglocentric heritage while trying to 'find a voice'. As Robert Fraser's discussion shows, the quality of writing in *The Horn* was generally poor, often imitating a nineteenth–century prosody gleaned from Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. But while this poetry was "seldomly distinguished", Fraser nevertheless argues that *The Horn* played a crucial role in the early stages of developing a Nigerian tradition of writing in English.[57]

A central problem facing the Nigerian poet writing in English was that African languages are generally tonally based rather than accentual. One of the more succesful attempts to negotiate this dilemma can be found in the works of Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo, who started publishing in *The Horn* and *Black Orpheus* in the early 1960s. Okigbo had a degree in Classics, and was greatly influenced by Latin lyrical poetry. In 'Songs of the Forest', for instance, he transposed Virgil's First Eclogue to his native Igbo countryside:

> YOU LOAF, child of the forest,
> beneath a village umbrella,
> plucking from tender strings a
> Song of the forest.
> Me, away from home, run–
> away, must leave the borders of our
> land, fruitful fields,
> Must leave our homeland.[58]

Referring to the interplay of vowel sounds in these lines, Fraser notes how a quantitative

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[56] His first pieces appeared in *Black Orpheus*, another newly started journal, in 1959, but after his return to Nigeria in 1960, he also featured in *The Horn* (Robert Fraser, ibid., pp. 93–4).

[57] Robert Fraser, *West African Poetry*, pp. 80–1. Similarly, in his *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (Lagos: University of Lagos/ New York: African Publishing Co., 1972), Bruce King notes: "When poets such as Clark or Soyinka have attempted to follow rigidly traditional English metric form, their poetry often seems stilted and the metre a straight–jacket from which they cannot burst free into song" (p. 10).

[58] Christopher Okigbo, 'Song of the Forest', *Black Orpheus*, 11, 1962; quoted by Fraser, ibid., p. 97.

Latin metre is a "great deal closer to tonal African systems than is conventional English prosody with its alien insistence on stress".[59] Such negotiations between the quantative metre of Latin and the stress–based metre of English must have struck a chord with Harrison, who had made similar experiments in his early student verses. But also the idea of recycling a classical material chimes with his artistic temperament. In Okigbo's case, the impulse to 'retranslate' can be related to his native Igbo inheritance. Speaking in 'Molière Nationalised' of the need to strive for an organic view of tradition, Harrison points to the example set by African cultures: "In the oral cultures of Africa when words or phrases no longer signify, thrill, or seem relevant...they tend to become changed. There is in this sort of culture a homeostatic process at work which we in our museum culture must often envy" (*Astley*, p. 145). While in Nigeria, Harrison was to work along the same lines as Okigbo. Together with James Simmons, he wrote an Africanised version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* for a group of student actors, who had previously worked with Soyinka in the production of his *The Lion and the Jewel*. The play was staged at Amahdu Bello University in 1964 as *Aikin Mata*, and subsequently published by Oxford University Press in Ibadan.[60] In the preface to *Aikin Mata*, Harrison explained his and Simmons' motive for choosing *Lysistrata*, and pointed for instance to the play's linguistic division between Attic Greek and Doric Greek. This conflict, which he had already explored from the perspective of his North of England vernacular inheritance, also reflected the current situation in Nigeria, where "we had a ready–made distinction between "Standard" English and Pidgin English".[61]

During his time in Africa, Harrison also worked on the group of poems that later comprised Part Two of his first full–length collection, *The Loiners* (1970). Central to these verses is the neo–colonialist encounter between Africa and Europe. 'The White Queen' as well as 'The Songs of the PWD Man' are written in the voices of white English males, who lead an exploitative and rather seedy existence in Africa on "expat pay" (*Selected Poems*, p. 21). Though formally different, these pieces correspond thematically

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59 Robert Fraser, pp. 97–8. That tonally based languages rely more on vowel sounds is also illustrated by Harrison's explanatory note to '*from* the Zeg–Zeg Postcards' in *The Loiners* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1970), p. 46. As he notes, in Hausa the English words "screw" and "screwdriver" have been appropriated as "*sukuru*" and "*sukurudireba*".

60 Tony Harrison & James Simmons, *Aikin Mata* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966).

61 Tony Harrison, 'Preface to *Aikin Mata*'; reprinted in *Astley*, p. 86. In the opening scene of *The Lion and the Jewel* Soyinka also touched upon this conflict, giving a scathing portrayal of the schoolmaster Lakunle's anglophile affectations (*Collected Plays*, Vol 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974)).

with an earlier sequence of poems which Soyinka had written while in England.[62] Also concerned with the African–European encounter, Soyinka's poems are written from the perspective of the black African living in Britain. And just as Harrison's exposure of the English colonist is merciless, so Soyinka focuses on the self–deceptive behaviour of the neo–colonial middle–class immigrant:

> My dignity I rescue
> From the shop assistant's levity
> From the raucous laugh
> Of the unmannered station guard
> (Who hasn't learnt his place)
> ...
> My mouth is showed perpetually
> Upon the word 'riff–raff'.[63]

In his discussion of *The Loiners*, Joe Kelleher draws attention to Harrison's use of the dramatic monologue in 'The White Queen' and 'The Songs of the PWD Man' (*Kelleher*, p. 8). Similarly, Soyinka's earlier poems are written as theatrical impersonations, revealing his interests as a playwright. In both scenarios the narrators keep their defence mechanisms alert, and remain unsettlingly detached from the cultures they inhabit. Human interaction is reduced to clandestine sexual encounters that are exploitative and self–demeaning. In Soyinka, the immigrant "makes his choice at random/ Haggles somewhat at the price,/ Then follows her, to pass/ The night/ In reciprocal humiliation".[64] And in Harrison's 'The White Queen', the protagonist:

> Pour[s] shillings in his hands and send[s] him back
> With the driver, ugly, frightened, black,
> Black, black. What's the use? I can't escape
> Our foul conditioning that makes a rape
> Seem natural, if wrong, and love unclean
> Between some ill–fed blackboy and fat queen.
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 22.)

Through his stay in Ahmadu Bello and his association with Wole Soyinka, Harrison not only witnessed the beginnings of a Nigerian tradition of writing in English. During the 1960s Nigeria also became an important centre for the growing international debate on Pan–Africanism and négritude, which was fuelled by the earlier writings of

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62 Wole Soyinka, 'The Immigrant', 'The Other Immigrant' and 'My Next Door Neighbour'. It was these poems that he sent back for publication in *Black Orpheus*, where they appeared as 'Three Poems' in 1959 (see Robert Fraser, pp. 93–5).

63 Wole Soyinka, 'The Other Immigrant', quoted by Robert Fraser, ibid.

64 Wole Soyinka, 'The Immigrant', in *The African Treasury*, ed. Langston Hughes (New York: Pyramid Books, 1960), p. 196.

Aimé Cesaire and Léopold Senghor. As Robert Fraser's study illustrates, *Black Orpheus* in particular played a key role in acting as a cultural bridgehead, not only forging links between francophone and anglophone Africa, but also between Africa and the Caribbean (*West African Poetry*, pp. 90*ff*). *The Loiners* is significantly peppered with references to *négritude*, although here, in the mind of the white European the term mainly carries racist/ erotic connotations: the White Queen's lover, for instance, is "marketable essence of beef—/ *négritude* — dilute to taste!"[65] In fact, the impact of the négritude movement on Harrison would be long–lasting, and is relevant not only to his early poetry but also to some of his later and finest work. In the opening poem of *The School of Eloquence*, for instance, the poet (now speaking in his own voice) identifies himself with the cultural quest of Césaire, calling "these sixteen lines that go back to my roots/ my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,/ my growing black enough to fit my boots" ('On Not Being Milton', ibid., p. 112).

Following his experience in Nigeria, Harrison's cultural horizon was further widened: 1966 and 1967 were spent teaching in Prague, and in 1969 a UNESCO fellowship brought him to Cuba, Brazil, Gambia, and Senegal. Between Prague and his fellowship, Harrison worked as editor for *Stand* while Silkin was abroad. Previously, *Stand* had already taken an interest in writing from the Eastern bloc countries, publishing poets like Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert and Nazim Hikmet. But in 1968, having acquired a sufficient command of Czech and experienced the literary climate in Prague himself, Harrison put together a special issue on 'New Writing from Czechoslovakia'. From the perspective of his North of England working–class experience, the works of the East European poets clearly highlighted his own concerns with the role of poetry in a culturally oppressed situation. It should be noted that this is also a link which has been explored by several other English–language writers of his generation, undoubtedly influenced by Penguin's *Modern European Poets* series which A. Alvarez began editing in the late 1960s. Tony Connor, another working–class poet, whose stanzaic verses about working–class people living in the industrial cities of the North sometimes bear a strong

[65] '*from* the Zeg–Zeg Postcards, XIII', *Selected Poems*, p. 37. See also 'Newcastle Is Peru', in which women's breasts displayed in a magazine are "tanned almost to *négritude*" (ibid., p. 68).

resemblance to Harrison's work,[66] had been translating Hungarian poetry into English. And later, in *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney sought to establish a common ground between his own troubled Northern Irish experience and the works of Mandelstam, Holub, and Zbigniew Herbert.

By exploring an international range of literatures, Harrison has generally sought to widen his sense of those alternative traditions that voice the experience of the dispossessed. And his interest in forging cross–cultural links manifests itself strongly in the various articles he wrote during the 1960s and early 1970s. Reviewing Alan Bold's *Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* for the *London Magazine* in 1971, he took the opportunity to discuss a wide range of texts which had been excluded from the anthology. Beginning with his own native region, Harrison complained: "Bold has made absolutely no use at all of nineteenth–century broadsides and ballads, though every mining and mill area of the North could provide many examples."[67] Quoting these lines from Charles Sorley's *To Poets* (1914), "we have an eviller spirit than you,/ We have a dumb spirit within,/ The exceeding bitter agony/ But not the exceeding bitter cry", he then notes:

> A specifically *poetic* protest is galled into being by both the inarticulateness of the dispossessed and the fluent, religious mystification of a class who sought to reconcile them with a fatalistic sentiment to a nature of things laid down by God and/ or Law... The fact that the exploited dead have no...voice...makes the form of rebellion linguistic, and often in that form of language which most often draws attention to itself, poetry.[68]

From this perspective, Harrison finds that there is a close link between the works of these North of England poets, "the twentieth–century poetry of the Third World and statements like Senghor's in *Nation et Voie du Socialisme* in which he probes the fallacy of the solidarity between the European proletariat and the colonised" (p. 88). Consequently, Bold's anthology is also criticised for its "ludicrous" representation of Third World

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66 See for instance Connor's 'St. Mark's, Cheetham Hill' , in *Faber Educational Books: Modern Poets Four*, ed. Jim Hunter (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), pp. 81–4. The poem describes a working class area gradually being taken over by immigrants. And with an ironic restraint that could have been Harrison's, Connor speaks of the Empire from a disillusioned working class point of view: on a faded photograph he sees the now run–down church of St. Mark's, "standing/ amidst the strolling gentry, as though/ ready to sail for the Empire's farthest parts;—/ the union jack at the tower's masthead/ enough to quell upstarts foreigners and natives" (p. 81).

67 Tony Harrison, 'All Out', review of *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse*, edited by Alan Bold, *London Magazine*, New Series, 10.12, March 1971, p. 87.

68 Ibid., pp. 88–9. In 'National Trust' and 'Working' from *The School of Eloquence* (*Selected Poems*, pp. 121 & 124), Harrison clearly draws on the example of such broadside ballads when commemorating the exploitation of convicts and miners, saying: "Wherever hardship held its tongue the job/ 's breaking the silence of the worked–out–gob". Furthermore, commenting on his future plans for the sequence in his interview with Haffenden, he reveals that there is to be a section which "goes into the poetry written by the so–called uneducated poets in the North in the nineteenth century" (*Astley*, p. 229).

writing.

This linking of his North of England working–class inheritance with the experience of the colonised is central to Harrison's affiliations as a writer. In 'Black and White and Red All Over: the Fiction of Empire', he speaks of his long–felt solidarity with the oppressed of the Empire, referring to Harold Nicholson's description of "the internal and external proletariat", and adds: "Every wind of change that ruffled the tashes of the toffs was blowing in my direction too."[69] In Harrison's opinion, what needed to be ruffled was not just the Empire's structure of power, but also the English literary climate. Ten years after 'Some Men Are Brothers', in which he had criticised the fragmentation of experience and fear of growth in post–war British poetry, he reiterated his concerns in a review called 'Beating the Retreat'. Central to this article is the conservationist and exclusivist tendencies found in contemporary writing: "For some it is not enough that Britain is an island; it must also be a verdant piece of private, high–walled garden."[70] Harrison expresses his dismay at seeing in Clifford Dyment "a poetry of exclusion, of urban noise...and ultimately of all sense of life, now and in England" (ibid.). Similarly, while gesturing at "the presence of violence and horror in the public world", P. J. Kavanagh "admits he is unable to cope with it" (p. 93). Picking on Kavanagh's consession to Adorno in "art/ can't deal with it,/ can't breathe Cyclon B — don't try", Harrison objects: "But it has to try a bit harder before it gives up and goes back to the cottage" (ibid.).

In contrast, Harrison found in the international climate of postcolonial and New World writings a general impulse towards 'reconciling history and poetry',[71] a need to restore the link between Art and Life. As we have seen before, in a poet like Heaney the same impulse manifested itself in a wish to "take the English lyric and make it eat stuff it had never eaten before".[72] Implicit in all this is not only the introduction of public themes: from the perspective of regionality it also involves a diversification of language, a vernacular grapple with a literary 'RP'. And in turn, this also reflects a wider strategy of keeping a received Western tradition organic and open to change.

Towards the end of *The Loiners* Harrison announced his return to his native region:

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69 Tony Harrison, 'Black and White and Red All Over: the Fiction of Empire', *London Magazine*, New Series, 12.3, August/ September 1972, p. 94.

70 Tony Harrison, 'Beating the Retreat', review, *London Magazine*, New Series, 10.8, November 1970, p. 91.

71 Harrison quotes this phrase from Octavio Paz in his review of Latin–American poetry, 'New Worlds for Old', *London Magazine*, New Series, 10.5, September 1970, p. 85.

72 Seamus Heaney, interviewed by Harriet Cooke, *Irish Times*, 28 December 1973, p. 8.

"after Nigeria and Prague I come/ back near to where I started from" ('Newcastle is Peru', *Selected Poems*, p. 63). According to John Lucas, at this stage the poet had already "found the subject and style which he has subsequently made uniquely his own. It was 'mucky' stuff".[73] Above all, *The Loiners* exhibits a relish in rhyme and poetic forms, ranging from the heroic couplets of 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' and 'Ginger's Friday', over the tetrameters of 'The Chopin Express', to the hexameters and septennaries of 'The Songs of the PWD Man' and 'The Death of the PWD Man'. But it is really not until *The School of Eloquence* that Harrison starts to tune his own 'Doric Reed', tapping into the vernacular energies of his native voice. In 'The Rhubarbarians, I' these energies demand our full attention:

> Those glottals glugged like poured pop, each
> rebarbative syllable, remembrancer, raise
> 'mob' *rhubarb–rhubarb* to a tribune's speech
> crossing the crackle as the hayricks blaze.
>
> The gaffers' blackleg Boswells at their side.
> Horsfall of Ottiwells, if the bugger could,
> 'd've liked to (exact words recorded) *ride*
> *up to my saddle–girths in Luddite blood.*
>
> What t' mob said to the cannons on the mills,
> shouted to soldier, scab and sentinel
> 's silence, parries and hush on whistling hills,
> shadows in moonlight playing knurr and spell.
>
> It wasn't poetry though. Nay, wiseowl Leeds
> *pro rege et lege* schools, nobody needs
> your drills and chanting to parrot right
> the *tusky–tusky* of the pikes that night.
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 113.)

"*Rhubarb–rhubarb*" is a phrase used by extras in the theatre to reproduce crowd noises on the stage, and it is evoked by Harrison to refer to the voices of the mob which have been silenced by History. But in an attempt to challenge History, these voices are here 'parroted right' in a vernacular noise of glottals and alliterated plosives that run through the poem. In this way, the anonymous "*rhubarb–rhubarb*" also metamorphoses into the somewhat more regionally distinct "*tusky–tusky*".

It is interesting to compare the vernacular noise in 'The Rhubarbarians' with Ted Hughes' Yorkshire voice, as it is described by Heaney in 'Englands of the Mind'. Commenting on the poem 'Thistles', Heaney notes: "The thistles are emblems of the Hughes voice as I see it, born of an original vigour, fighting back over the same ground;

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[73] John Lucas, 'Speaking for England?', *Astley*, p. 356.

and it is not insignificant that in this poem Hughes himself imagines the thistles as images of a fundamental speech, offering itself in gutturals from behind the sloped arms of consonants" (*Preoccupations*, p. 155). These "gutturals of dialect", Heaney elaborates, echo a Nordic stratum of English which retains "the stark outline and vitality of Anglo–Saxon that became the Middle English alliterative tradition and then went underground to sustain the folk poetry" (p. 151). Speaking to Richard Hoggart of his translation of "Yorkshire's great classic", the Northern Mystery Plays, Harrison also pointed to the consonantal energies which the Anglo–Saxon line shares with Yorkshire dialect (Hoggart, p. 44). And this affiliation is also borne out in those heavily accentuated alliterations in the opening of 'The Rhubarbarians': "Those glottals glugged like poured pop". Here it should be added that the consonantal vitality of Anglo–Saxon was also channeled into Middle Scots, which Harrison taught himself while at Leeds. Later, in 'Beating the Retreat', he voiced his admiration for the way the "marvellous Dunbar and Henryson" could move "from aureation to lewd colloqialism...with their formal grace and brilliance" (p. 95). Similarly, as Heaney points out, Hughes has been indebted to "the cleaving simplicity of the Border ballad" ('Englands of the Mind', p. 156).

In *The School of Eloquence*, however, Harrison relies as much — if not more — on vowel sounds when probing for the vernacular energies of his Leeds accent. This becomes clear when looking at his use of rhyme. Just as Heaney in an early student poem "innovated a South Derry rhyme/ With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*",[74] Harrison strikes back at the proprietors of Received Pronunciation in 'Them & [uz]', saying: "Wordworth's *matter/ water* are full rhymes" (*Selected Poems*, p. 123). In the same way, from the perspective of his North of England voice the *could/ blood* in the second stanza of 'The Rhubarbarians' are in fact full rhymes. Similarly, in 'Wordlists' we have *drawer/ before* (ibid., p. 117), and in 'Long Distance, II' (p. 134) as well as 'Book Ends, I' (p. 126), *gas/ pass*. 'Book Ends' furthermore plays on a dialect–based assonance in the phrase "that last apple".

As these examples show, the rhymes and assonance in the vernacular are connected to the length of the syllables: *matter/ water* rhyme because the first syllable in "water" is short in Yorkshire dialect as opposed to Standard English. Similarly, "blood" is short, turning the vowel into the [u]–sound also found in the emblematic [uz] that the poet uses

74 Seamus Heaney, 'The Ministry of Fear', *North*, p. 64. As I noted in Chapter 2, Heaney here refers to a poem from 1959, called 'Reaping in Heat'.

as his "pronoun of solidarity" in 'Them & [uz]'.[75] And this aspect of Harrison's voice leads us back to his classical training, and his early experimentation with quantitative metre. Talking to Hoggart about translating Aeschylus' *Oresteia* into English, Harrison touched upon the problem of staying true to the original form of the Greek and of getting the metre energetic:

> There's a style of acting which is also related to the posh [Southern] voice which draws attention to itself, which is about melody, it's vowel–based like singing, it's very graceful, whereas I believe that in the Greek if you tap the consonantal energy, you have a driving momentum which is necessary... I got that by insisting on short vowels which are your vowels, my vowels; the short vowel, rather than the long vowel (p. 44).

Similarly, in his poetry Harrison relies heavily on vowel lengths to negotiate between his vernacular heritage and a regular metre. In 'Them & [uz], I' he recalls how "4 words only of *mi 'art aches*" in front of his English teacher had him branded as a barbarian (*Selected Poems*, p. 122). But interestingly enough, on closer inspection the boy's rendition of Keats turns out to be metrically smoother than if one was to say it in 'RP'. Dropping the diphtong in "my" and replacing the aspirated *h* in "heart" with a glottal stop produces a short–long–short vowel sequence with natural stress on the long "*art*" — combining, in other words, the feel of accentual and quantative metre. The regularity stemming from this verbal music of glottals and vowels is also detectable in some of the passages in *The School of Eloquence* where the poet reports his father's speech. In 'The Queen's English':

> x / x / x / x / x /
> *If you weren't wi' me now ah'd nivver dare!*
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 136.)

Strictly speaking, the "*weren't*" comprises two syllables, but due to Harrison's contraction of vowels, it can be seen as one. (As a compensation the word carries a muted stress, which in the overall pattern is nevertheless subordinated to the main beats.) This relativity of vowel lengths in the vernacular occasionally challenges the reader, as in 'Next Door': "*It won't be long before Ah'm the only white!*" (ibid., p. 129). The line starts with two iambic feet, setting the pulse: "*It won't be long...*" But then we have "*before Ah'm*", which requires some attention. At first it is tempting to regard "*before*" as a iambic foot as well, staying true to the Standard pronunciation of the word. However, from a semantic

[75] Harrison refers to it as such in a BBC 2 'Arena' programme from 1985; quoted in Bruce Woodcock, 'Classical Vandalism: Tony Harrison's Invective', *Critical Quarterly*, 32.2, Summer 1990, p. 52. 'Them & [uz]' is dedicated to Richard Hoggart, whose study of working–class life in England, *The Uses of Literacy* (op. cit.) has an entire chapter entitled "'Them' and 'Us'".

perspective a more satisfactory rendition of the line is achieved if we obey Harrison's short Yorkshire vowels, in which case the stress and emphasis from *–fore* is moved to the glottalised *Ah'm*. This turns "*before Ah'm...*" into an anapaestic foot, allowing the iambic beat to take over again in the final "*t'only white*":

x / x / x x / x / x /
It won't be long before Ah'm t'only white!

All of these passages reflect Harrison's wish to forge a link between his vernacular heritage and a formal poetic tradition. Dotted throughout the sequence, they work as aural reminders of the claim made in 'Confessional Poetry':

> *But your father was a simple working man,*
> they'll say, *and didn't speak in those full rhymes.*
> *His words* when *they came would scarcely scan.*
>
> Mi dad's did scan, like yours do, many times!
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 128.)

This, however, leads us to the central dilemma in Harrison's voice. Compared to the other poets discussed in the present study, it can be argued that Harrison's cultural negotiations have been further complicated by his own Englishness. In the cases of Heaney, Walcott and Murray, their indigenous traditions are founded on questions of region or nation. To Harrison, however, the cultural barrier has been one of class, and the process of education has been one of cutting links, though at the same time it has also facilitated the forging of other cultural links, for instance with ancient Greece and Africa. In 'Them & [uz], I' he recalls:

> I doffed my flat a's (as in 'flat cap')
> my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great
> lumps to hawk up and spit out... *E-mun-ci-ate!*
> (Ibid., p. 122.)

As noted before, Heaney recently commented on his sense of relief, when as a schoolboy he came across the homely, vernacular idiom of Burns — epitomised by the word "och" — in the high–cultural context of the schoolbook text.[77] If his encounter with English Literature in school was largely the encounter with a language that "did not re–echo our own speech in formal and surprising arrangements",[78] he was also quickly introduced to an extant vernacular tradition. In contrast, Harrison's educational experience has to a

[77] Seamus Heaney, 'Burns's Art Speech', in *Robert Burns & Cultural Authority* (op. cit.), pp. 216–33.
[78] Seamus Heaney, 'Mossbawn', *Preoccupations*, p. 26.

greater extent involved a cultural assimilation, a shedding of one's native tongue as it was seen to be unfit for poetry. Similarly, while Walcott speaks of his native Caribbean culture as one of eloquence, where he discovered a ready "fusion of formalism with exuberance, a delight in both the precision and the power of language",[79] there is a prevailing sense that Harrison's indigenous working–class culture and the culture of literature and learning were irreconcilable, reflecting that "dreadful schism in the British nation" which Burke diagnosed (and to which Harrison alludes in 'Classics Society'). And speaking on the behalf of his working–class culture through a medium which belongs to the word–culture of the oppressor is a precarious project. Harrison must act as the educated poet who straddles two worlds, whose voice spans the demotic "Now mi dad's the only one keeps up his front" ('Next Door, II', *Selected Poems*, p. 130) as well as subjunctives like "*as though* his still raw love *were* such a crime" ('Long Distance, II', p. 134).

Douglas Dunn has also touched indirectly upon this dilemma when comparing the works of Harrison and Heaney. The two poets, he notes, share "a perception of how their voices are not those of the proprietorial language of the literature to which they have devoted themselves".[80] However, their formal strategies differ markedly from each other:

> Harrison's...metre and full rhymes are ingrained habits of composition that identify a classic obedience to lucidity. Heaney's easier discipline creates a greater variety of expressive rhythms, and these and his approximate rhymes suggest a more natural set of loyalties. Where Harrison's sense of beauty is drawn from a son's love, through a sieve of classical example, Heaney's filial devotion is filtered through land and its traditions, through place, community and family.[81]

While Heaney's "easier discipline" helps to manifest his inherited Northern Ireland word culture, Harrison's classical approach manifests the conflict of his Englishness. First of all, though, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which his "classic obedience to lucidity" goes some way to accommodate his need for a democratic art–form. As I have mentioned previously, Harrison was already as a student critical of the tendencies in Modernist poetry to speak in riddles which appeal to an exclusive, self–consciously intellectual audience. In his recent essay 'In the Canon's Mouth', Peter Forbes elaborates on this, noting how a long–forgotten eighteenth–century aesthetic has nourished his

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79 Derek Walcott, 'Meanings', *Savacou*, 2, 1970, p. 51.

80 Douglas Dunn, 'Formal Strategies in Tony Harrison's poetry', extract from his 1990 Kenneth Allott Memorial Lecture, 'The Topical Muse: On Contemporary Poetry' (published by *Liverpool Classical Monthly*, 1990), printed in *Astley*, p. 129.

81 Douglas Dunn, '"Importantly Live": Lyricism in Contemporary Poetry', an inaugural lecture given at Dundee University on 28 October 1987, subsequently published in *Dundee University Occasional Papers* series, 1; extract reprinted in *Astley*, p. 257.

poetry in a manner that a twentieth–century tradition has been unable to: "eighteenth–century poetry intends to communicate by using the common stock of ideas and phrases and moulding them into something harmonious— new but not startlingly novel."[82] This clearly also chimes with Harrison's notion of the poet as a craftsman, reflecting a wish to have his profession reconciled with the working–class culture he came from. In his preface to *The Misanthrope*, Harrison makes a link between the clarity found in classical metrical lines and the songs of George Formby.[83] And this marriage of traditional poetic structures and a popular, parodic Cabaret–style mode also shows in his predilection for dead–pan rhymes and puns, as well as the punchlines so often deployed as closures in his poems (see for instance 'Illuminations, I' and 'Old Soldiers'). At times it also produces some rather heavy–footed metrical lines, which Dunn sees as part of his 'Scholarship Boy's Revenge': "Its ironies are drawn from pentametric regularity — the philistine standard of verse — to subjects that otherwise subvert or denounce the mistaken political, social and literary expectations that those who uphold that standard tend to invest in it".[84]

This type of revenge is also announced in 'Them & [uz], II': "So right, yer buggers then! We'll occupy/ your lousy leasehold Poetry" (*Selected Poems*, p. 123). And 'On Not Being Milton' seeks to establish some sort of cultural lineage between such a revolt and the 1812 uprising of Yorkshire croppers against mill owners:

> Each swung cast–iron Enoch of Leeds stress
> clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
> the looms of owned language smashed apart!
> (Ibid., p. 112.)

The raw energy found in such instances has induced Luke Spencer to speak of Harrison's "lifetime's battle to make the regularity of iambic metre yield to the unmannerly interruption of a subaltern voice".[85] To Spencer, the iambic metre is a "fundamentally bourgeois establishment form" which "allows the optimum combination of classical...binary metrical order with the rhythms and pronunciation patterns of a hegemonic 'class dialect'" (ibid.). At this stage, though, it should be clear that such talk of "metrical vandalism" in Harrison's subaltern voice is somewhat overstated. Even in *v.*,

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82 Peter Forbes, 'In the Canon's Mouth', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner* (op. cit.), p. 194.

83 Tony Harrison, ' Jane Eyre's Sister', *Astley*, p. 140. See also his interview with Haffenden, pp. 237–8.

84 Douglas Dunn, 'Formal Strategies in Tony Harrison's Poetry', *Astley*, p. 130.

85 Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (London: Harvester & Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 17.

his long poem from 1984, in which the poet dramatises an encounter with a young skinhead who has desecrated his parents' grave, the skinhead's harsh language is robustly metrical, forging a link with those nineteenth–century North of England broadsheet balladeers hailed by Harrison:

> *So what's a* cri–de–coeur, *cunt? Can't you speak*
> *the language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er!*
> *Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?*
> ....
> *Ah'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke.*
> *It's reading on their graves the jobs they did–*
> *butcher, publican and baker. Me, I'll croak*
> *doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid.*
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 241.)

Spencer also makes a somewhat desperate case for seeing 'The Rhubarbarians' as a poem that successfully undermines its own "bourgeois prosodic form". Eventually, he argues, "the rhyme scheme...gives way under pressure as the final stanza resolves itself into a pair of rhyming couplets that enact the Luddites' hard–won solidarity" (p. 69). In order to accept such an interpretation, however, we would have to see the rhyming couplets towards the end of the poem as being less bourgeois than the preceding 'hegemonic' form of *abab*.

Indeed, the question of Harrison's linguistic and poetic subversiveness is more complicated than Spencer makes it out to be. It is important to keep in mind that in lines like "We'll occupy/ your lousy leasehold poetry", it is the *poet* that speaks, the scholarship boy on the war–path against those who educated him. Consequently, we are also left wondering who that collective pronoun "we" refers to. Clearly, it is not the skinhead in *v.*, who punctures Harrison's notion of himself as a spokesperson of the tongue–tied, as well as his sense of [uz]:

> 'Listen, cunt!' *I* said, 'before you start your jeering
> the reason why I want this in a book
> 's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!'
> *A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!*
>
> 'The only reason why I write this poem at all
> on yobs like you who do the dirt on death
> 's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.'
> *Don't fucking bother, cunt! Don't waste your breath!*
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 242.)

Given his own received eloquence and classical training, Harrison easily exposes himself to the charge of misrepresenting or idealising his North of England proletarian inheritance.

And over the years, several commentators have also voiced such reservations. Craig Raine, a fellow poet with an almost identical social background, has criticised him for focusing too much on issues of deprivation and suffering, while Bruce Woodcock speaks of an "advocacy of suppressed working–class experience...[that] can verge on nostalgic idealisation of virtues in a lost past which is at best questionable".[86]

Still, Harrison is also painfully aware of the pitfalls of trying to represent a cultural tradition from which he is partly estranged. On several occasions, he has spoken of a North of England working–class male reticence, a "mock–Yorkshire taciturnity of 'hear all, see all, say nowt", which has produced "an environment where poetry was only for the 'lassy–lad'".[87] Consequently, while a poetry of alliterations may affirm the consonantal energies of his Yorkshire dialect, he also deploys them to draw attention to a cultural inhibition of speech, as in his Uncle Joe's stutter:

> His gaping jaws
> once plugged in to the power of his stammer
> patterned the stuck plosives without pause
> like a d–d–damascener's hammer.
> ('Study', *Selected Poems*, p. 115.)

Similarly, Harrison's extensive use of demotic elisions — like '*'s*' and '*d've*' — reflects this complex relationship to his own medium. They can be seen, as Spencer sees them, as part of a linguistic revolt against a bourgeois establishment form, although Spencer incorrectly hears them as 'ruffling' the metre. In fact (and this is another reason why Harrison uses them), such demotic abbreviations often work *with* the metre rather than *against* it: in *v.*, the contraction of "I have" to a monosyllabic "Ah've" in "*Ah've 'eard all that...*" (p. 243) facilitates the primary stress on "*'eard*". Similarly, the elision in "One half of me 's alive but one half died" (p. 244) reduces the syllable count from an uneven eleven to ten, as metrically, the '*'s*' becomes part of the preceeding stressed syllable "me".[88] In addition, these abbreviations can also be viewed as words that have been

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86 Craig Raine, 'Subjects', *London Review of Books*, 5.18, 6–19 October 1983, p. 5; Bruce Woodcock, 'Classical Vandalism', p. 53. See also Blake Morrison, 'A Filial Art: A Reading of Contemporary British Poetry', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 17, 1987, pp. 191–6.

87 Tony Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa', *Astley*, pp. 32 and 34.

88 In 'Molière Nationalised', Harrison says of his extensive use of demotic abbreviations in his plays as well as in his poetry: "The elision of *is*...in positions natural to English speech, though uncommon in representations of that speech in English verse, was one of the first devices I hit upon to create the illusion of the colloquial". He continues, pointing to the interrelationship he sees between colloquial speech and metre: "I have for a long time felt that [English] ought to be better equipped [for pointing out vernacular elisions]. One has great need for notations as these things must be scored...in a form as metrically tight as the heroic couplet" (*Astley*, pp. 141–2).

subdued in the larger context, dramatising the silencing process of Harrison's vernacular culture. Although they are occasionally being deployed deliberately to produce an effect à la "*tusky–tusky*", they tend to be relegated to unstressed positions, if not swallowed up entirely in the metrical scheme (as in the above example).

While the appropriation of a classical art language in one sense has been enabling from the perspective of Harrison's working–class background, there is no escaping the fact that the poetic medium itself also comes between the poet and his native culture. In his interview with John Haffenden, Harrison notes that "[s]omewhere in [*The School of Eloquence*] I see a section where the form breaks down, and the command of articulation and languages begin to be a burden" (Haffenden, p. 229). This is felt most clearly in those instances where he searches for a private, intimate voice. 'Book Ends, II' relays how his father reproaches him, "*the bright boy at description*", for being unable to find "the right words" to put on his own mother's gravestone (*Selected Poems*, p. 127). But the poet is defeated by his own learning:

> I've got the envelope that he'd been scrawling,
> mis–spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling
> but I can't squeeze more love into their stone.

Later, in 'Isolation', we witness his attempt to write a classically formed elegy for her:

> I cried once as a boy when I'd to leave her
> at Christmas in the fourth year of the War
> taken to Killingbeck with scarlet fever,
> but don't cry now, although I see once more
> from the window of the York–Leeds diesel back
> for her funeral, my place of quarantine,
>
> and don't, though I notice by the same railtrack
> hawthorns laden with red berries as they'd been
> when we'd seen them the day that we returned
> from the hospital on this same train together
> and she taught me a country saying that she'd learned
> as a child: *Berries bode bad winter weather!*
>
> and don't, though the fresh grave's flecked with sleet,
> and dad, with every fire back home switched on, 's
> frozen,
> and don't
> until I hear him bleat
> round the ransacked house for his long johns.
> (*Selected Poems*, p. 142)

In *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison uses a sixteen–line form reminiscent of the Meridithian sonnet, basically consisting of four rhymed quatrains. Like the sonnet, this

structure allows for a limited scope of narrative while being essentially self–contained, lending itself to a lyrical, meditative mode. While there is generally a good deal of variations throughout the sequence, in 'Isolation' the form almost seems to break down. An underlying pattern of four quatrains is still suggested by the rhyme scheme, and the piece also follows a classical rhetorical structure, emphasised by the front–weight of "I cried once", "but don't cry now, although", "and don't, though", "and don't, though", leading to the resolution of "and don't/ until". However, such formal lucidity also projects a sense of distance and emotional control, which collides with the personal grief that is the poem's subject. From the beginning, there is a sense that the poet is slightly out of balance, unable to handle the four–line stanzaic structure. Eventually, the rhyme scheme ends with a grammatically uneasy *on, 's/ johns*, and the emotional strength and sincerity manifests itself as the lines finally dissolve.

In fact, the strength of the poem arguably lies in the way the poet is uneasily poised between formal lucidity and the silence that has burdened his parents' culture. Its eloquence comprises a pained stuttering, which enacts the threat of breakdown and struggle for recovery. In fact, while his poetic medium arguably distances Harrison from his indigenous tradition, it is also enabling in as much as it can be used to enact, or to shed light on, the cultural tensions of his 'England of the mind'. In his conversation with Richard Hoggart, Harrison spoke of metre and poetic form as the poet's life–support system: "It means I can go closer to the fire, deeper into the darkness... I don't have the heart to confront some experience unless I have this rhythm to carry me to the other side" (p. 43). Similarly, in 'Facing Up to the Muses' he comments on the poetic role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, explaining the function of their masks. When man experiences atrocities and suffering he averts his eyes. In contrast:

> If a mask gazes on the same horrors, the same terrors, it goes on gazing. It is created with open eyes. It *has* to keep on looking. It faces up to the Muses. What does a mask do when it suffers or witnesses suffering through these continually open eyes? Words never fail it. It goes on speaking. It has faith in the word (*Astley*, pp. 445–6).

This ability to go on speaking, he once again points out, is further facilitated by the rhythmical thrust of the metre. Such a classical belief in poetry's potential as an autonomous voice that can carry us out of the darkness is one that Harrison also shares with Walcott and Heaney. In 'The Poet and the Theatre', Walcott speaks of formal grace, sound and metre as a vehicle for the cathartic, as a genuine alternative to the despair and

suffering which has taken over the art of poetry in the course of this century.[89] Similarly, in *The Cure of Troy*, his 1990 version of Sophocles's verse play *Philoctetes*, Heaney says:

> Poetry
> Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice
> Of reality and justice. The voice of Hercules
> That Philoctetes is going to have to hear
> When the stone cracks open and the lava flows.[90]

Throughout his career, Harrison's ambition has been to show how a classical, lyrical tradition can survive in the twentieth century, not merely as a nostalgic bourgeois household poetry, but that it can take the strain of contemporary themes of social struggle and human atrocities. As he states in the title poem of his most recent collection, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*: "If art can't cope/ it's just another form of dope".[91] Throughout the 1970s and up until the mid–1980s, his main concern has been to stage the class–conflicts of his own particular North of England experience. But in later years, in the works coming after *v*., Harrison has turned his gaze elsewhere, and has generally sought to tackle wider existential and twentieth–century issues. His latest collection, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, is an attempt to confront the horrors of modern warfare. It includes his previously published Gulf War poems, 'Initial Illumination' and 'A Cold Coming', and the title piece — originally a film poem made for the BBC — uses the legendary creature of the Gorgon which turns men to stone as a metaphor for the atrocities of our age. The collection furthermore opens with 'Sonnets for August 1945', which is Harrison's latest addition to *The School of Eloquence*. While the poet is back in Leeds in this sequence, the central theme is no longer class division or cultural estrangement. In fact, the atmosphere here is remarkably different from the earlier poems. In'Snap':

> My shorter father's all in and looks glad
> and full of euphoria he'd never found
> before, or since, and I'm with the grocer's lad
> two fingers turned the positive way round!
> (*The Gaze of the Gorgon*, p. 14.)

Set in the summer of 1945, these poems describe the general euphoria following the end of the war. There is genuine sense of family unity and of national pride: the

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89 Derek Walcott, 'The Poet and the Theatre', *Poetry Review*, 80.4, Winter 1990/ 1991, p. 4.

90 Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 2.

91 Tony Harrison, 'The Gaze of the Gorgon', *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 62.

working–class boys turn their fingers "the positive way round", and all join in the celebration of Englishness and *Rule Britannia*. However, Harrison's real mission in these poems is to see those VJ–celebrations in the context of the events that triggered them:

> The Rising Sun was blackened on those flames.
> The jabbering tongues of fire consumed its rays.
> Hiroshima, Nagasaki were mere names
> for us small boys who gloried in our blaze.
> ('The Morning After, II', ibid., p. 10.)

As Harrison says later in 'Initial Illumination':

> Now with noonday headlights in Kuwait
> and the burial of the blackened in Baghdad
> let them remember, all those who celebrate,
> that their good news is someone else's bad
> or the light will never dawn on poor Mankind.
> (p. 46.)

This ambition to tackle wider issues in his later works has also lefts its mark stylistically on Harrison's voice. The 'Sonnets for August 1945' exhibit a regularity in the sixteen–line form not found in the earlier parts of *The School of Eloquence*. Obviously, this can be linked with the fact that the poet has put the linguistic and formal struggle that reflected his Englishness behind him. His poetry no longer serves as a platform for *enacting* cultural conflicts. Instead, he wishes to affirm his belief in the word. In this way, he has allowed his voice to subject itself more readily to the poetic medium. In his American poems, most notably 'A Kumquat for John Keats', 'Following Pine' and 'Cypress & Cedar', there is a relaxed meditative and more balanced lyrical note not seen before in his works. And in his war poems, the function of his voice is to go on speaking, to be able like the chorus in Greek drama to address our conscience: the life–line of the metre is constantly there. These poems, it also has to be remembered, are aimed at a wider, popular, and not necessarily literary audience: Harrison's Gulf War poems were originally written for *The Guardian*, and 'The Gaze of the Gorgon' is the last of several TV–poems which have followed in the trail of *v*. Especially in the medium of television, where the audience does not have a printed text in front of them, it is often necessary to subordinate verbal density and formal complexities to the function of the text as narrative vehicle. In this way, though, there is also the danger that writing for television involves a 'dumbing down' of language.

Indeed, it can be argued that, after leaving the linguistic and formal dialectics of his

previous works behind, the metricality of Harrison's lines has begun to present itself more visibly — or rather, audibly — as a problem. From time to time, critical voices have questioned the degree of success with which Harrison has sought to negotiate between strict metrical forms and colloquial speech. In a recent article, John Lyon has noted that "Harrison's ostensible subject matter — the fraught, politically charged contest of poetry and of language generally — is undermined and exposed as anachronistic by the loose, inattentive garrulity of his own practice."[92] Against such arguments, defenders of Harrison have pointed to his deliberate ironising and parodying, contributing to a somewhat uneasy debate in which the readers are ostensibly prevented from criticising what they see as formal weaknesses. Romana Huk, for instance, claims: "Critics who direct us to..."shortcomings" articulate the poems' formal thematics most effectively."[93] In his later works, however, in which the thematics are no longer those of linguistic subversiveness and tensions, such counter–arguments seem to lose their validity. In an essentially lyrical piece like 'Cypress & Cedar', Harrison is seen negotiating colloquiality with metricality: "I'd've used it for the Ark if I'd been Noah" (*Selected Poems*, p. 232). While the "I'd've" in this line may look messy from a typographical point of view, from a metrical point of view it is perfectly tight, forming a trochaic foot. But then we have this:

/ x x / x / x / x /
Peace like a lily pad on swamps of pain—
/ x x / x / x / x /
floating's its only way of being linked
(Ibid., p. 233.)

The contraction in this second line is rather more problematic: inviting us to be spoken, the "floating's its" is nevertheless hard to pronounce, partly because of the succession of consonants — *ngz–ts* — and partly because that sound progression has to be performed without the aid of any stresses. Clearly, prolonged by the affixed voiced *z*–sound, "ting's" is a mighty long voiced syllable to have in an unstressed position, and consequently calls for a stress on the following syllable. However, moving the stress positioned on "only" forward to "its" seems to interfere with the meaning. Similarly, if the reader tries to impose a caesura between "ting's" and "its" to ease the pronunciation, the

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92 John Lyon, 'Doing it All: Tony Harrison', *Thumscrew*, 6, Winter 1996-7, p. 11. See also John Lucas, 'Speaking for England?', *Astley*, pp. 358-60, and Tim Kendell, 'He Makes it Rhyme', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 January 1998, p. 13.

93 Romana Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual', p. 206. See also Blake Morrison, 'The Filial Art', *Astley*, p. 57.

grammatical function of that 's is in danger of being obscured. Two alternatives then suggest themselves to the reader: "floating is its only way" — which ensures the metrical regularity, although it introduces an extra stress to the line — or the eliptical "floating its only way", which, while making the sentence infinite, at least sounds more colloquial.

But the problem of Harrison's formal practice seems to have more serious implications when we turn to his war poems. When 'A Cold Coming' originally appeared, it was accompanied by a photograph of the body of a charred Iraqi soldier. The poem begins as the soldier addresses the poet: "Isn't it your sort of poet's task/ to find words for this frightening mask?" (*The Gaze of the Gorgon*, p. 48). In 'The Drunken Porter Does Poetry: Metre and Voice in the Poetry of Tony Harrison', Martyn Crucefix draws attention to the metronomic regularity of 'A Cold Coming', rightly arguing how "Harrison worries little over any narrow authenticity of voice in this case".[94] He elaborates: "it is Harrison's establishment and then variation of the poem's metrical 'life–support system' that enables him to...complete a poem which weighs in against Adorno's view that lyric poetry has become an impossibility in the shadow of this century's brutality" (p. 163). To illustrate this, he then points to a passage where the metre is "threatened" by the intensity of the horror with which the poem deals: the soldier's speech, Crucefix notes, brings "the verse juddering and gasping to a incomplete line with "the image of me beside my wife/ closely clasped creating life..."".[95] Commenting further on this passage, he observes:

> this section stumbles and hesitates metrically as if Harrison himself (or rather the persona he has adopted in the poem) is half–conscious of retreating into safe, calculative, and ratiocinative processes. Eventually, a conclusion yields itself up, but it is once again the metrical change of gear into smooth regularity that suggests this is a false, defensive, even cynical avoidance of the difficult issues raised by the charred body in the photograph (p. 164).

The question then remains, does the poem really help to disprove Adorno's remark about the impossibility of lyric poetry after Auschwitz? Is Harrison's metronomic voice in fact such an apt 'life–support system' that enables us to face the un–faceable and to deal with it? A general critique that can be aimed at some of these more recent poems dealing with the horrors of this century, is that their metrical regularity produces a sense of

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94 Martyn Crucefix, 'The Drunken Porter Does Poetry: Metre and Voice in the Poetry of Tony Harrison', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner* (op. cit.), p. 162.

95 Ibid., p. 164. From a metrical perspective, however, the cited line is perfectly regular and complete in the overall tetrametric scheme.

emotional detachment. The only way in which Harrison seems to be able to find words for the soldier's "frightening mask" is by engaging in a profoundly sarcastic monologue about the preservation of semen before going into battle, to ensure your own procreation. In the end, as John Lyon also points out, the "visually eloquent" photo of the charred victim of war is so much stronger than the poem itself, and is "so quickly left behind" ('Doing It All: Tony Harrison', p. 13). In 'The Gaze of the Gorgon', the tetrametric lines create a similar distance. Rather than aiding the poet, the strict control of the rhyme scheme tends to produce what is merely experienced as weak lines: "The main financial centre/ of the EEC has to present a" (*The Gaze of the Gorgon*, p. 64). And generally, given its regularity, the verse occasionally strikes a note of insincerity which is clearly not intended. Notice the manipulation of stress here in "Frankfurters", dictated by the metre as well as the somewhat forced rhyme with "Goethe's": "From Schiller's statue back to Goethe's/ watching smartly dressed Frankfurters" (p. 3). Incidentally, Harrison is here speaking of drug users who have been ostracised by society, and who roam the parks.

Commenting on *v*. in 'Speaking for England?', John Lucas rightly noted that the real energies in Harrison's poetry lie in its "versuses" (*Astley*, p. 345). Compared to Heaney, Walcott and Murray, whose appropriation of a poetic tradition has facilitated their enunciation of a native lyric voice, Harrison's poetics have revolved around the cultural dilemma of being estranged from his native culture through his literature. His merits as a "peasant" poet negotiating a received tradition have to a greater extent been fuelled by a sense of subversiveness, by a need to hiijack a "lousy leasehold Poetry". In his later works, however, where that conflict and its concommitant linguistic and formal tensions have given way to other themes, reflecting a wish to address a wider cultural and historical situation, the perceived distance of Harrison's medium has arguably become more of a hindrance. Instead of serving as a vehicle for acting out the internal struggle of his Englishness, his metrically governed voice has now become a somewhat problematic instrument, which sometimes prevents him from speaking as a committed individual. While the metre enables him to enter the darkness of the twentieth century, there is a sense that the urgency of his themes somehow disappears as he steps out. As a "mandarin" affirming his belief in poetry's "civilizing mission", the formal practices springing from his earlier stance as a classically educated "peasant" have arguably become stiffling, preventing Harrison from exploring the finer nuances of his poetic voice.

Conclusion

Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison roughly belong to the same generation. Moreover, in their early youths their countries were still part of the Empire, and had stood together during the Second World War. While acknowledging their different national or cultural backgrounds, it is important also to see them collectively as belonging to a current, international climate of English–language poetry. In the previous chapters these four writers have been examined individually, in order to alert the reader to the particular circumstances which have helped to form their poetic careers, as well as to stay true to the distinguishing features of their respective voices. While this has involved focusing on the poets' rootedness in different regional, vernacular experiences, I have also sought to be susceptible to their shared sense of working with a wider poetic inheritance. This conclusion elaborates on some of the main points of commonality which have already emerged. Most importantly I wish to draw attention to how, in their role of "Peasant Mandarins", Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have come to act as vernacular exemplars, as well as occupying a crucial position as cosmopolitan brokers of a shared, democratic tradition of poetry in English.

A central concern in this thesis has been to illustrate how the four poets, while working in a post–Empire climate, have all been exposed to a canonical, Anglocentric tradition of 'English Literature' as an essential part of their early initiation into a literary culture. In effect, as I have shown, the educational experience of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison has been marked to varying degrees by an awareness of difference, a sense of cultural distance between what Heaney has called "the parish and the academy".[1] As an Australian, Murray thus recalls his difficulties of reading about landscapes and climates which were foreign to him, and like Heaney and Harrison he has often commented on a schoolbook poetry that did not re–echo his own language experience. In contrast, though, Walcott stresses his own early understanding of literature as a distinct art language capable of appealing to a shared imagination; so he maintains that reading Wordsworth in the tropics never really posed a problem. Still, as a Caribbean poet his artistic development has necessitated some sort of mediation between a European literary heritage and a voice of indigenous experience.

In this way, these poets share cultural concerns which have also preoccupied earlier

[1] Seamus Heaney, *Among Schoolchildren*, p. 8.

generations of writers from a colonial, regional, or otherwise marginalised situation. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance, Joyce described Stephen Dedalus's sense of estrangement, evoked during a conversation with the English Dean at Clongowes:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech.[2]

A similar experience has been voiced by the Hebridean poet Iain Crichton Smith in his autobiographical essay 'The Double Man',[3] and in an interview from 1973 Hugh MacDiarmid said in connection with his schooling:

> I was brought up in a border town where English was the snob, nob language which we were forced to speak in school. In fact, we were punished for speaking the Lallans which was natural to us. So when I started writing I set out to revive Lallans as a language for real poetry. There was no one much to model myself on — only Burns and some medieval poets in Lallans — but rather than allowing English poets to influence me I turned to the literature of France and Germany.[4]

MacDiarmid's embrace of French and German literatures rather than English seems to prefigure Harrison's search during the 1960s for an international range of exemplars to accommodate his own cultural outlook, as described in Chapter 4. Indeed, at this stage it should be clear that each of the poets I have discussed has worked towards a culturally distinct voice by combining a strong sense of place with a remarkably cosmopolitan outlook. This is why describing them merely as 'regional' or 'national' poets is too reductive and misleading. Yet, there is also a danger in adopting a generalising post–colonial approach, treating these poets exclusively as 'resistance writers' who have responded to the cultural hegemony of the old Empire by turning against — or turning down — an English lyric tradition. To assess properly their position, it has been necessary to consider the extent to which each writer has *used* as well as resisted the 'English Tradition' to which he was initially exposed. In other words, while acknowledging the difficulties arising from an educational experience that has been culturally challenging, this study of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison has sought to

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2 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Everyman/ David Campbell Publishers Ltd., 1991), p. 237.

3 Iain Crichton Smith, 'The Double Man', in *The Literature of Region and Nation*, ed. R. P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 136–46. As this essay also shows, in Crichton Smith's case the conflict was further deepened by the fact that his first language was Gaelic.

4 Hugh MacDiarmid, interview with Kay Kent, in the *Irish Times*, 21 December 1973, p. 12.

examine the ways in which their schooling has contributed to their literary awakening, and not least how it has even nourished their individual developments as "Peasant Mandarins".

As I have illustrated, remaining true to the established syllabus, the teaching of 'English Literature' in the post–war period often incorporated Old and Middle English as a compulsory feature, and generally had a strong representation of Renaissance and Romantic texts, while comparatively little attention would be paid to the twentieth century. Interestingly, an early familiarisation with Old and Middle English poetry seems to have alerted several of the writers discussed to the vernacular origins and potential of an otherwise standardised canon of 'English Literature'. As I noted in Chapter 1, reading *Beowulf* at university Heaney quickly became aware of etymological links between Old English and the vernacular culture of Northern Ireland. Such perceived linguistic affinities also spurred Harrison's retranslation of the Northern cycle of Mystery Plays, in an attempt to "restore Yorkshire's great classic to itself".[5] Part of this appeal can be explained by the essentially colloquial nature of Old and Middle English literature. Yet the consonantal energies found especially in the voices of Heaney and Harrison also seem to combine an informed sense of early English poetry with the poets' own regional heritage. In his introduction to *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse*, Tom Paulin commented in general on the "gnarled, spiky qualities of verse...nurtured in an oral community",[6] qualities that also mark the Anglo–Saxon line, which, as Heaney has noted, evolved into the Middle English alliterative tradition, and then "went underground to sustain the folk poetry" (*Preoccupations*, p. 151). In this connection, it should be added that the musical qualities of Old and Middle English poetry seem not only to have alerted these writers to their own vernacular inheritance, but also steered them in the direction of other alternative folk traditions, which have typically been excluded from the scope of an Anglocentric curriculum. Discussing Harrison's search for a distinct Northern English voice, I noted how he drew inspiration, not only from Anglo–Saxon poetry, but also from the Middle Scots of Gavin Douglas. Similarly, a connection can be suggested between Murray's early interest in Old and Middle English texts at university, and his extra–curricular discovery of Celtic poetry, whose nimble sound–patterns and use of internal rhyme influenced him greatly and, as we have seen, also linked with his explorations of Aboriginal folk material.

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5 Tony Harrison, interview with Richard Hoggart, in *Astley*, p. 44.

6 Tom Paulin (ed.), *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), Introduction, p. xi.

If, as Heaney points out, the Anglo–Saxon line generally went underground in the mainstream of English poetry, it has occasionally resurfaced, most notably in the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose 'sprung rhythms' were based partly on the purely accentual metre of Anglo–Saxon verse, and partly on his knowledge of a Welsh folk tradition. It is therefore not surprising that among the writers included in a standardised syllabus of English literature, Hopkins has had a crucial influence on the poets discussed in this study. In this way, Heaney points to the acoustic affinities between Hopkins's verse and a Northern Ireland accent (*Preoccupations*, pp. 44–5). Similarly, speaking of his early initiation into a poetic culture at Taree High School, Murray notes: "suddenly here was Hopkins showing that language could be exciting, could come alive, could be about relevant things".[7] Another important exemplar who needs to be mentioned in this context is Dylan Thomas, who was greatly inspired by Hopkins, and like him drew on a Welsh bardic tradition. During the 1950s, Thomas became a central presence in the increasingly internationalised climate of English–language writing, influencing a whole generation of younger poets, as we have also seen in the early student verses of Heaney, Walcott and Harrison. However, in each case it also seems that to the aspiring poet the example of Thomas has been a somewhat overpowering and inhibiting influence, which in the long run had to be exorcised rather than internalised.

Generally, when looking at the English canon as it appeared on the school and university syllabus in the post–war period, it has been important to consider those poets whose works exhibit an indigeneous sense of place — linguistically as well as geographically — that goes against the grain of any homogeneous, centralised version of English culture. Pointing in my introduction to the historical development of 'English Literature' as a university subject, I touched upon its inherent cultural disunity, illustrated for instance by the appropriation of such non–English writers as Wilde, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir. In hindsight, it is clear that the process of recognising this disunity has been a significant liberating factor for poets like Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison. It has enabled them to explore a wider range of literatures, without having to dismiss a sense of a poetic tradition as it was transmitted via the teaching of English. Heaney thus speaks of the importance of coming across Burns in the high cultural context of the school textbook, a discovery that helped to validate his belief in his own vernacular inheritance, as well as in the potential of the poetic medium. Furthermore, as we have also

[7] Les Murray, interview with Graeme Kinross Smith, *Westerly*, 25.3, September 1980, p. 41. See also Murray's linking of Hopkins and Welsh bardic poetry, discussed in Chapter 3.

seen, in the course of defining a shared, but culturally heterogeneous tradition of English–language poetry, Heaney has on numerous occasions explored the regional diversity of a national English literature. Among the exemplars he has sought to rescue from the clutches of a potentially homogenising canon are John Clare, Edward Thomas and Thomas Hardy — all of whom he tends to list as "peasant poets", often in conjunction with twentieth–century non–English writers like Patrick Kavanagh, R. S. Thomas, Edwin Muir and Norman MacCaig.[8] Similarly, it has been particularly enabling for Harrison's sense of a poetic heritage to be able to detect echoes of his own Yorkshire vowels in the poetry of Wordsworth, or relate his vernacular glottal sounds to "Cockney Keats".[9] Considering such attitudes in the works of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, this thesis has sought to alert the reader to how, in a post–Empire context, these writers have been able to react against Anglocentrism, without dismissing the body of texts being appropriated and canonised as 'English Literature'. Instead, what they have done is to draw attention to already–existent peasant strains within a culturally dominant tradition, strains which prefigure and validate their own concerns as poets writing from the fringes of Empire.

When looking at the post–war period, such negotiations with the canon seem to have gained impetus from the gradual internationalisation of the literary climate. Especially, the global shift in cultural power during the 1950s from the old centre of Metropolitan England to the new one of the United States resulted in a growing awareness of American poetry across the English–speaking world. As I have illustrated, Walcott was at an early stage introduced to the writings of Walt Whitman, and commends him as the founding father of a New World poetic tradition, praising him for the way in which he combined a strong veneration for a received formal tradition with a casual, colloquial idiom of speech.[10] According to Walcott, these qualities have been upheld most notably in the twentieth–century American voices of Robert Frost and Robert Lowell,[11] poets to

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8 Seamus Heaney, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Preoccupations*, p. 115. See furthermore essays like 'In the Country of Convention' (*Preoccupations*), and 'John Clare's Prog' (*The Redress of Poetry*). Also Walcott seems particularly indebted to Edward Thomas and John Clare as "peasant poets", as expressed for instance in 'Homage to Edward Thomas' (*Poems: 1965–1980*, p. 75), as well as in the title poem of *The Bounty*.

9 See Tony Harrison, 'Them & [uz]', *Selected Poems*, pp. 122–3.

10 As noted both by Tom Paulin in *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse* (Introduction, p. xi), and by Robert Crawford in his chapter 'Anthologizing America' from *Devolving English Literature*, Whitman was also significantly influenced by the vernacular energies found in the works of Burns.

11 See my discussion in Chapter 2.

whom Heaney is equally indebted.[12] Similarly, as I pointed out in Chapter 3, Murray also familiarised himself with this Whitmanesque line of writing at an early stage, and has singled out Robinson Jeffers and James Dickey as two additionally important representatives.

But while acknowledging the influence of American writing upon Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, it is crucial also to recognise how such an appropriation has generally been tempered by a resistance to the growing cultural dominance of the United States. Central to their negotiations as 'cultural provincials' has been a need to counterbalance an emerging American–centred hegemony, as well as the old Anglocentrism of Empire. Along with the "peasant poets" mentioned earlier, the American exemplars adopted by Heaney, Walcott and Murray help to illustrate how, in an internationalised climate, these writers have tended to resist a city–centered post–war aesthetics which has preoccupied itself with the fragmentation of human experience, and generally registered a moral doubt in the possibilities of a lyric poetry after Auschwitz. Writing from situations that even in a post–Empire metropolitan context have been considered as cultural margins, it has been paramount to Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison to restore a trust in the affirmative powers of language and of the lyric medium itself. On the whole, reflecting their position as self–appointed bards of relegated experiences, this also explains their communing with a vast range of pre–twentieth–century poetries. In the course of this study, I have commented on Heaney's appropriation of *dinnseanchas*, Old Irish place–name poems, to forge a ceremonial voice with which he could celebrate his native region, and traced similar concerns and influences in Murray's works. Furthermore, I have illustrated how this move towards reintroducing the ceremonial, celebratory function of poetry has been central to Walcott's Caribbean voice, which he himself has linked to a Homeric scribal tradition. Even in Harrison's case, the appropriation of the Meredithian sonnet serves not merely to stage a battle between a standardised, proprietorial word–culture of English and the poet's own working–class vernacular. It should also be viewed as an attempt to canonise his native experience through a received literary form.

In other words, central to my discussions of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison has been to draw a link between their strong sense of pre–twentieth–century

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[12] As I noted in Chapter 1, Heaney took a course on modern American literature at Queen's, where he studied the works of, among others, Robert Frost. See furthermore his essays 'Above the Brim: On Robert Frost', *Salmagundi*, Nos. 88–89, Fall 1990–Winter 1991, pp. 275–94, and 'Lowell's Command', in *The Government of the Tongue*.

poetries, and their late–twentieth–century concerns as "peasant poets". However, at the same time it has been equally important to relate these peasant concerns to their position as Mandarins working in the international climate of contemporary English–language writing. In 'Les Murray: The Peasant Mandarin' I argued that Murray, while continuing a celebratory Boeotian tradition, should not be seen as turning his back on a twentieth–century Athenian culture. Highly conscious of his role as a poet acting in a wider, cosmopolitan context, he speaks of how a synthesis between Boeotia and Athens may help to accommodate the cultural pluralism of our age. Moreover, he considers the restoration of a Boeotian sensibility into our poetry as an important lesson for a metropolitan culture that has been riddled by a sense of spiritual fragmentation. Similarly, when both Walcott and Harrison confirm their belief in the celebratory and cathartic powers of the poetic voice, they not only act as peasants who have adopted the lyric medium to break the silence with which History has relegated their native inheritances. They also address a wider post–modern culture that has come to revere — as Walcott argues — "silence...over the articulate" as a way of dealing with the atrocities of this century.[13] This affirmative, mandarin defence of the lyric voice also formed a central theme in Heaney's Oxford lectures, aptly titled *The Redress of Poetry*.

When examining Heaney's, Walcott's, Murray's and Harrison's negotiations as 'cultural provincials' in an internationalised post–Empire climate, it has clearly also been necessary to consider the legacy of Modernism. Drawing attention to English–language literature as an increasingly cosmopolitan phenomenon, writers like Joyce, Eliot and Pound took on the role as international provincials who at once appropriated the 'civilising' tradition administered by metropolitan England, and at the same time exposed it to various kinds of demotic speech, as well as drawing on an eclectic range of 'exotic' or 'primitive' cultures. In *Ulysses*, Joyce disturbed the cultural map of Empire by making provincial Dublin in A.D. 1904 the setting for a re–enactment of Homer's *Odyssey* — that monumental founding text in a Western literary tradition. This way of decentralising and democratising a classical heritage obviously set an important example for the Peasant Mandarins discussed in this study. Like *Ulysses*, Walcott's *Omeros* reads as a twentieth–century 'provincial' epic that, by claiming Homer, contests the cultural marginality of a particular region and its people. Both Walcott and Harrison have drawn

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[13] Derek Walcott, 'The Poet in the Theatre', *Poetry Review*, 87.4, Winter 1990/ 1991, p. 4. See also my discussion in Chapter 2. See furthermore Tony Harrison's Gulf War poems, 'Initial Illumination' and 'A Cold Coming', as well as 'The Gaze of the Gorgon' (all collected in *The Gaze of the Gorgon*), and my discussion of them in Chapter 4.

extensively on their classical schooling to give voice to an indigenous experience, and inscribe it into a wider cultural contiuum. Similarly, Murray's appearance as a Virgilian bard in his first collection of poetry, *The Ilex Tree*, helped him to assert a sense of poetic ancestry. As I have illustrated, this later paved the way for defining an alternative Boeotian tradition which pre–dates Western literary civilization, and is seen to have upheld provincial values against the hegemony of an Athenian culture.

The Modernists generally loomed large in the literary landscape of the post–war years. When considering their impact on poets like Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison, Eliot especially stands out as an important, but problematic exemplar. That his example has been impossible to ignore is hardly surprising, given the way he came to occupy a central role as spokesperson and definer of poetic tradition in the middle of this century. And it was not least through his prose writings that he was to have a crucial impact on the literary climate of the period. As noted earlier, speaking of his time at Queen's University of Belfast, Heaney stresses how Eliot's criticism — with its generalised discussions of poetic craft, "the experience of poetry" and the "auditory imagination" — had a formative impact on him as an aspiring poet. Similarly, in 'Purifying the Language of the Tribe' I examined how Walcott has been visibly influenced by essays such as 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in which Eliot argues that "as a principle of *aesthetic*", one cannot assess a poetic work on its own, treating it exclusively as the product of its own time and place. Instead, one must see it as an integral part of a continuous, cosmopolitan tradition springing from Homer.[14]

But if Eliot's poetics in some ways furthered a sense of cultural breadth, and if the linguistic polyphony and elements of synthesis in his works have helped to widen the territory for poetry, he also came to represent a strain of mandarinism that was still culturally hierarchic as well as being intellectually élitist. Despite his own role as a provincial, Eliot's concept of tradition essentially remained monolithic and discriminatory, marginalising texts that failed to sustain or contribute to what he described as "the great organic formations of History"[15] — thinking especially of a metropolitan, Eurocentric cultural order rooted in a classical heritage. In this way, the general interest of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison in "peasant" or Boeotian writings has not merely been treated in this study as a reaction against a post–war metropolitan literary climate. It has also been seen in relation to the example set by Eliot. Similarly, in dealing with them as

[14] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 38. Emphasis added.

[15] T. S. Eliot, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?', *Athenaeum*, 1 August 1919, p. 681.

Peasant Mandarins who have championed a more inclusive, democratic tradition of poetry — as manifested for instance by Murray's and Harrison's celebrations of nineteenth–century newspaper versifiers — I have not only sought to discuss that in the light of a widespread academisation of the literary climate in the post–war period. I have also argued that such concerns were generally reflected in these writers' early response to Eliot's ideal of poetry as belonging to an intellectual high culture. Thus, both Murray and Harrison have criticised his "flight from equality",[16] while Heaney recalls how the educated, cerebral qualities of Eliot's voice initially scared him off, and made him "feel small and embarrassed".[17]

A further example of the way in which Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have reacted as 'cultural provincials' against Eliot's particular strain of mandarinism is found in their shared response to his canonisation of Dante as the exponent of a Eurocentric, Latinate tradition that "cuts across the modern division of nationality".[18] As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, without dismissing the universal appeal of a poetic text such as *The Divine Comedy*, these poets simultaneously stress how its universality is in fact complemented by its cultural specificity, as captured by Dante's Tuscan vernacular — a specificity Eliot sought to suppress from his interpretation. This awareness of poetry's dual capacity to function as a culturally universal voice, and at the same time to manifest itself as the distinct product — or emblem — of a particular time and place, has been central to my discussions of the Peasant Mandarinism in the works of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison. As we have seen, it formed a central theme in Heaney's collection from 1991, *Seeing Things*; and it has been at the core of Walcott's life–long project of forging the consciousness of his race through a Homeric epic, realised most ambitiously in *Omeros*. In addition, it manifests itself in Murray's sense of a universal Boeotian tradition, which in its ramifications encompasses the poetries of an infinite range of indigenous sub–cultures. Finally, it has informed Harrison's otherwise Eliotic sense of a classical literary heritage that is kept alive by being exposed to continuous cultural retranslations.

This dual awareness not only reflects the way in which these poets have negotiated with a sense of tradition passed on by Eliot. It also helps to shed light on their specific role as vernacular–but–cosmopolitan poets in the international climate of post–coloniality

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16 Les Murray, 'Pound Devalued', *The Paperbark Tree*, p. 16. See furthermore my discussion in Chapter 4.

17 Seamus Heaney, 'Learning from Eliot', *Agenda*, 27.1, 1989, p. 21. See also Chapter 1 above.

18 T. S. Eliot, 'Dante', *Selected Prose*, p. 207.

and new national traditions. In their essay from 1989, 'Finding the Centre: 'English' Poetry After Empire', Mark Williams and Alan Riach noted that "Imperialism, like nationalism, promulgates a unity only by submerging difference."[19] If this is strongly put, the remark does help to illustrate some of the problems that arose during the 1960s, when the devolution of 'English Literature' was well under way, and the 'new' canons of national literatures were being assembled. As I illustrated in my chapters on Walcott and Murray, in both the Caribbean and Australia the project of defining a national literary tradition was complicated by the dangers of merely replacing the colonial legacy of Anglocentrism with new, equally hegemonic strains of cultural proprietorship. In this way, a growing preoccupation in the West Indies with notions of Negritude and pan–Africanism threatened to marginalise Walcott's particular concerns as a Caribbean poet with a part–European, part–white inheritance. Similarly, if the early attempts during the 1950s to draw up the contours of a national Australian literature were marked by the censorship of an Anglocentric élitism springing from academia, the climate of the 1960s showed the growing cultural domination coming from America. In effect, as Murray experienced it, a lot of the evidence was suppressed in the process of defining a tradition, such as Aboriginal poetries and writings that did not generally reflect Australia's growing ambition to become a metropolitan city–culture. Consequently, he speaks uneasily of an emerging canon that threatened to become as undemocratic and unrepresentative as when Australian literature had been treated as a minor parenthesis to the 'mother' tradition of 'English Literature'.

Obviously, this is not to suggest that Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison have been dismissive of being seen in their respective national contexts. It should already be clear from my discussions that questions of national awareness play a prominent role in their works, as expressed by Walcott's ambition to forge the consciousness of his race, or by Murray's championing of his 'Vernacular Republic'. However, as 'cultural provincials' who simultaneously see themselves as taking part in a wider tradition of English–language poetry, these writers are understandably wary of *any* kind of classifications that threaten to subdue individual concerns and cultural differences with assumptions of unity. As an English poet, Harrison's primary task has been to give voice to a regional working–class inheritance which has been silenced by History, and so also to draw attention to the cultural divisions which have caused "a dreadful schism"[20] in his

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19 Mark Williams & Alan Riach, 'Finding the Centre: 'English' Poetry After Empire', *Kunapipi*, XI.1, 1989, p. 99.

20 Tony Harrison, 'Classics Society', *Selected Poems*, p. 120.

nation. In 'Tony Harrison: An Inner Émigré', I examined how this revolt against a unified, reductive image of Englishness has also manifested itself in the poet's use of colonialism as a metaphor for his own experience, enabling him to forge cultural links with African writers like Soyinka and Okigbo, and Caribbeans like Césaire. As we have seen, such negotiations with cultural labels were also at the core of Heaney's response in 1983 to his inclusion in Blake Morrison's and Andrew Motion's anthology, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. In his verse–pamphlet *An Open Letter*, he objected to being labelled as "British", just as he has later voiced his disinclination as an Irish poet to write for the republican cause, insisting on his own artistic autonomy.[21]

Calls for a greater awareness of diversity have been crucial to my considerations of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison as "Peasant Mandarins" who work in an international climate of English–language poetry. And in this respect, the present study also shares the concerns voiced in several recent accounts of post–war poetry from Britain and Ireland. In *The Deregulated Muse* (1998), Sean O'Brien sets out to commend "the very *variousness* of contemporary poetry [which] seems to prevent, or at any rate dispute, the emergence of a dominant line."[22] Emphasising rather than seeking to subdue qualities of diversity reflects a new shift in cultural attitudes, he argues, and illustrates it by referring to the failure of Morrison and Motion in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* to "respect the *variety within the franchise*" (ibid., p. 17) — a failure he also identifies in other post–war works, such as A. Alvarez's *New Poetics* (1962).

In this way, *The Deregulated Muse* focuses on issues also voiced in two anthologies which appeared recently, namely O'Brien's own *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, and Simon Armitage's and Robert Crawford's *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*.[23] In *The Firebox*, O'Brien argues that "some ideas of nation and nationality no longer seem as respectable or secure as they might have done even a generation ago", noting how the late–twentieth–century poet's sense of nationality is tempered or accompanied "by an openness to other literary cultures — Scots, Welsh, Caribbean", leading to a general sense of "inclusive pleasure" (Introduction, p. xxvii). Similarly, in their introductory essay to *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, appropriately titled 'The Democratic Voice',

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21 See Seamus Heaney, 'The Flight Path', *The Spirit Level*, p. 25.

22 Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (op. cit.), Preface, p. 9.

23 Sean O'Brien (ed.), *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (London: Picador, 1998); Simon Armitage & Robert Crawford (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (London: Penguin Books/ Viking, 1998).

Armitage and Crawford observe: "At a time when global travel and communications are taken for granted, and the international circulation of poetry through magazines and volumes developed further, it would be absurd to insist on notions of 'pure' Irish or English or other poetries" (p. xxvi). And elaborating on the cultural diversity of the works included, they note:

> Continually, these [post–war] poets display an awareness of inhabiting one voice that is among others, part of a vernacular community surrounded by further vernacular communities. The democratic voice...is unhieratic, belonging to a culture of pluralism, where its authority is both challenging and challenged (pp. xxi–xxii).

Consequently, while focusing on work produced in Britain and Ireland, these anthologies do not seek to draw a circle on the world map of poetry to isolate and define a distinct, homogenous tradition. Instead, the editors wish to promote a sense of openness, and to stay true to a culture of pluralism in which poetries seem constantly to resonate across national and cultural borders. In this way, these anthologies implicitly look beyond the geographical demarcations of their titles, gesturing towards a more cosmopolitan scope, as the one adopted in the present study of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison.

Indeed, the sense in which these four Peasant Mandarins have come to occupy a central position in an internationalised climate of English–language poetry was recently highlighted by the debate about the British poet laureateship following the death of Ted Hughes. In the course of this debate, Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison were all mentioned by the press as possible candidates. However, if this unofficial shortlist reflected a general acceptance of these writers as prominent figures in a diversified, polycentric tradition of poetry writing, it also overlooked the political and cultural implications which are tied up with the job as Poet Laureate. Not surprisingly, in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, Les Murray responded to the rumours that he had been nominated by saying that although he felt honoured, he would have to decline any such appointment if offered to him. Rejecting the notion of him being a *British* Australian, he noted: "So far as I [know], the job [is] the laureateship of England, not of the English–speaking world", elaborating: "I simply [do not] see Queen Elizabeth as my head of state...much as I respect[ ] her as the head of a friendly foreign power."[24] In the same way, as an Irish citizen Heaney did not want to be considered.[25] But the key issue was not just one of nationality: as an English poet, Tony Harrison made it abundantly clear that

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[24] Les Murray, 'Selecting the Poet Laureate', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 December 1998, p. 17.

[25] See 'N.B.', in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 February 1999, p. 16, and 19 February 1999, p. 16.

given his cultural affiliations and republican leanings, he could never accept such an offer. In a piece submitted to the *Guardian*, entitled 'Laureate's Block: For Queen Elizabeth', he noted: "I'm appalled to see newpapers use my name/ as "widely tipped" for a job I'd never seek." And evoking the example of Thomas Gray, he argued:

> There should be no successor to Ted Hughes.
> "The saponaceous qualities of sack"
> are purest poison if paid poets lose
> the freedom as PM's or monarch's hack.
>
> (...)
>
> I'd sooner be a free man...
>
> free not to have to puff some prince's wedding,
> free to say up yours to Tony Blair,
> to write an ode on Charles I's beheading
> and regret the restoration of his heir.[26]

And while Walcott seemed keen on the job as England's Poet Laureate, he simultaneously stressed that "from my point of view it is an honour to do with the English language".[27] As a poet, he did not see his Caribbean identity as an obstacle, explaining: "To follow in the footsteps of Tennyson, Masefield, C. Day Lewis and Betjeman sends a shiver down my spine" (ibid.); "I feel my ancestors are as much Tennyson as somebody who says you are really from a tribe in Africa and your ancestors are from there" (p. 9).

Although reflecting their shared sense of resistance to a post–Empire legacy of Anglocentrism, the individual reactions of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison in the debate about the poet laureateship are also suggestive of their differences in cultural temperament. While this thesis has treated these poets collectively as Peasant Mandarins in the context of an internationalised climate of English–language writing, it has also sought to remain aware of these differences. As should be clear from my discussions, in negotiating a literary canon passed on by the Empire, Murray and Harrison seem generally to have asserted their Peasant sides more aggressively than Heaney and Walcott, leading to a poetry that is marked more visibly by attitudes of demotic resistance. In contrast, Heaney and Walcott have to a greater extent worked as appropriators, who have been more at ease with internalising the exemplars of an English lyric tradition, though without cutting their links with a native, vernacular inheritance.

Still, when discussing them in the light of an emergent post–Empire tradition of

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26 Tony Harrison, 'Laureate's Block: for Queen Elizabeth', *The Guardian*, 9 February 1999, p. 15.

27 Derek Walcott, interview with Geordie Greig, 'On the Crest of a Wave', *Sunday Times*, 14 February 1999, Section 8, 'Books', p. 8.

English–language poetry that is cosmopolitan and distinguished by cultural plenitude, it is essential also to recognise how this tradition is capable of encompassing an infinite variety of attitudes. As I noted in my introduction, after the devolution of Empire there has been a tendency to lump the new literatures of the former colonies together, seeing them as part of a unified post–colonial culture that resists, or even seeks to reject, a Eurocentric Western heritage. Treating poets like Heaney and Walcott in this context clearly threatens to subdue an awareness of their profound sense of debt to the legacy of English poetry. Furthermore, if literary criticism has generally been too obedient to the paradigms dictated by post–colonial theory, and adopted its sharp distinctions between what could be categorised either as 'English' and 'British', or 'Other', then this sort of polarisation has often worked as a stumbling block for comparing post–colonial writings with the 'silence–breaking' of an English working–class poet like Harrison. Most importantly, though, if commentators have sought to draw up the contours of a post–colonial literary tradition by pointing to an identifying set of cultural attitudes, questions of genre and of aesthetic or poetic value have been in danger of being marginalised. The need to resist these tendencies is also voiced by O'Brien in *The Deregulated Muse*, as I noted in my introduction, as well as in *The Firebox* and *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, where the editors seek to give primacy to the reading experience itself. Focusing on poetry as a distinct art form which carries its own authority by allowing itself (even insisting upon) absolute linguistic and imaginative autonomy, their ambition is not to identify determining cultural and political currents. And this is what enables them to identify a sense of a shared tradition that is distinguished by its diversity, spanning Gaelic, Welsh and Irish verse, figures like Betjeman and Auden, as well as dub–poems like 'Inglan Is a Bitch' by the Jamaican–born Lynton Kwesi Johnson.

Clearly, such concerns can be related directly to the sense of tradition championed by Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison.[28] As "Peasant Mandarins" writing in the aftermath of Empire, these four writers have not merely appropriated a poetic heritage to create a cultural platform for their own indigenous experiences. Just as importantly, they have maintained an awareness of poetry as a distinct art medium, whose universal authority relies as much on its aesthetic impulse to delight through aural and linguistic inventiveness, as on its ability to address the world in which we live. This study has been

[28] Indeed, when O'Brien, Armitage and Crawford strive in their selections to focus on the reading experience and poetic worth, rather than singling out dominant cultural trends, they promote the same values as those adopted by Heaney and Murray in their anthologies (see my discussions of Heaney's *The Rattlebag* (1982) and *The Schoolbag* (1997) in Chapter 1, as well as of Murray's *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (1986) and *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (1986) in Chapter 3).

alert to the cultural and political factors which helped to form the individual voices of Heaney, Walcott, Murray and Harrison. At the same time, I have sought to be true to the aesthetic experience which their poetry has to offer. Finally, it should be noted that my aim has not been to attempt a conclusive account of each poet's *oeuvre*, which would have been beyond the scope of this thesis, and an impossible task since those *oeuvres* are as yet incomplete. Each poet is still highly productive, adding new material to his existing body of work. Still, the present author is confident that these poets' future projects will just confirm this discussion of them as important senior exponents of poetry in English, each of them a "Peasant Mandarin" who has successfully and clearly negotiated his traditions in the receding wake of the Empire.

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Appendix

Transcripts of taped interviews conducted by the author and cited in this study

1. Interview with Michael Allen. Belfast, 6 February 1996.

NE: *You started teaching at Queen's University in 1964. When you first arrived here, what was your impression of the English Department?*

MA: It was certainly a very traditional place when I arrived. There were General students and Honours students, and they had separate courses, so that there would be a lecture on Victiorian fiction and poetry for the Honours students, and a lecture on the same topic for the General students. In fact, I was asked to do the one for the General students as soon as I arrived, although I actually came here to teach American literature — that was what I had been appointed to do.

NE: *So the degree course started off with a general survey of the whole field of English literature?*

MA: Yes. There was a historical run–through, with a lot of Old English. The whole place was very Edwardian back then, like a colonial outpost, and the English Department was probably one of the last bastions of compulsory Old English. But the changes came around the time Heaney had settled in [as a lecturer], and started to become noisy at the department meetings. One of the things I remember clearly was that it was Heaney who suggested that modern *British* literature starts with Yeats, or more precisely in 1889, with *The Wanderings of Oisin*. So in those days, he definitely thought that Yeats, and perhaps even he himself, were British writers, whatever he later decided on.

NE: *When going through the university calendars from the mid–1960s, I noticed that an author like Thomas Hardy suddenly began to be taught as a poet rather than a novelist.*

MA: Yes, I think this was again Heaney's interests coming through.

NE: *When you arrived, what was the range of twentieth–century poetry being taught?*

MA: Well, Philip Hobsbaum taught modern British poetry, and he almost saw the Group as being related to the Movement poets, so they would have been taught [...]

NE: *How about Scottish poetry?*

MA: No, not then. For instance, I don't think one knew about [Norman] MacCaig until a bit later. Muir, yes, because Peter Butter was interested in him... But as I said, after a couple of years, Heaney started influencing things a lot. For example, he started teaching the Irish poetry course. And by the time he left, Edna Longley was still lecturing on Shakespeare. And then, being an old conservative, I was quite upset when she said that she wanted to teach British and Irish poetry, because I liked what she had to say about Shakespeare. But she took over from Heaney, and was obviously right to switch when she did.

NE: *Did you have any connection with Hobsbaum's creative writing group?*

MA: Yes. I was a member for quite a while. And then there were these two meetings: one, where Hobsbaum read his own poetry — and Harry Chambers and I didn't like it — and the following one, where Longley read his work — and of course, Hobsbaum didn't like that. On this occasion, Harry Chambers and I defended Longley, having attacked Hobsbaum the previous week, and we were expelled! But you know, coming from the milieu of Trinity College, Dublin, people like Longley and Derek Mahon had been preparing an aesthetic that was very different from the current British aesthetic. And Heaney did at first find this British thing quite useful, because culturally, he was very different from these people. But then, in 'Personal Helicon', the final poem in *Death of a Naturalist*, he credits this very different aesthetic coming through Longley. [...]

NE: *One thing that interests me is Heaney's early, uneasy relationship with T. S. Eliot's poetry, and the ways in which he has negotiated that over the years.*

MA: Yes, that's right. I remember in those early days when teaching Eliot, how we agreed that *The Waste Land* was "fading on the page". And Heaney has since revised his opinion, saying in the *Government of the Tongue* that the great Eliot is the symbolist Eliot

of *The Waste Land*. But C. K. Stead's *The New Poetic*, which was on our reading list in the mid–1960s, did a lot to influence him in that direction.

2. Interview with Peter Butter. Glasgow, 12 December 1995.

NE: *Seamus Heaney began studying English at Queen's in 1957. That must have been the year before you arrived as the new Head of the department?*

PB: Yes. Yes, Heaney's was an unusually good year. There was a chap called Seamus Deane, and during the final year, where I knew them, he was perhaps regarded as the star more than Heaney. Later he became a lecturer in Dublin, and I think that he wrote poetry as well. There was another chap called Stewart Parker, who wrote quite a bit too, plays and things. But sadly he died quite young. I suppose those were the stars, as far as combining academic work with creative writing goes, but there were two or three other pretty good students as well. As I said, it was an exceptionally good year, and of course, Philip [Hobsbaum]'s being there, gathering together the creative people into a little group made it quite a stimulating time.

NE: *Yes. Did you experience some sort of nexus between Hobsbaum's writing group and the university? Was it mainly university students who went along to the Group's gatherings?*

PB: Well, I don't remember how many people Philip used to have, but a small number I should imagine. And I've always been in favour of having creative writing groups, and of people being encouraged in that way, but I've never been particularly keen on creative writing as an academic subject. I think it is the duty of the ordinary lecturer to be a scholar and to teach the traditional literature, and one doesn't — I wouldn't — presume to try and teach people to write, except to write essays. So I should say that there wasn't exactly a nexus, but having a writing group was something I very much approved of.

NE: *If you were to give an academic profile of the English Department...*

PB: Well, the Queen's University was very much in the tradition of the Scottish universities. And I think the traditional thing, as in Scotland, was that in the first year, there would be a wide–ranging survey of the whole field, say, from *Beowulf* to Virginia

Woolf. And normally, the Professor would organise that single–handedly. He laid out the whole subject, which wouldn't be a fashionable thing nowadays.

NE: *So did you carry out that task at Queen's?*

PB: Well, to a certain extent. When I got there, I primarily gave lectures, perhaps not back to *Beowulf*, but from the Renaissance up to modern times. But we started off with Anglo–Saxon, and then went all the way through, and occasionally brought other people in to help with particular subjects. But if I remember correctly, we abandoned that in favour of more focused subjects. But still, those were fairly wide–ranging courses in the first year. I think at one time we did 'Four Great Writers': Shakespeare, Wordsworth... I forget. Anyway, that was one way of focusing, and yet covering a whole range of periods. And then in the second year, we had a particular period, say the Renaissance. And if the students were acceptable, they went into Honours for the final two years, where again, the courses would be wide–ranging. I think there was an insistence that you had to do a bit of Anglo–Saxon, and a bit of medieval literature. Most people wanted to concentrate at that stage on the more modern periods, but they were compelled to do a bit of the older stuff as well.

NE: *Was Anglo–Saxon a strength of the department?*

PB: No, I wouldn't say that, but there was an insistence that everybody should have some knowledge of the development of the language and the literature over the whole period. No, I suppose that the most distinguished teachers would have taught modern literature, like Laurence Lerner, and Romantic literature. But it wasn't organised like most courses are today. The students had to run through the whole thing, and then if you wanted to be a specialist, then you went on to do your M.Litt. or Ph.D. or whatever.

NE: *According to Hobsbaum, in the final two years of the programme the Honours students had more of an influence on the choice of texts. Was that your experience as well?*

PB: I expect so. One was always keen to consult them, and to allow a fairly wide range of choice to the individual.

NE: *Did you teach Heaney in any of your own tutorials?*

PB: Yes, I think I had him in the final year. He was very good!

NE: *Yes, he must have distinguished himself, since after he graduated, you encouraged him to do a postgraduate degree at Oxford.*

PB: Oh yes, Oh yes!

NE: *At the time, did you discuss a potential topic?*

PB: Well, I remember suggesting to him a project on Wordsworth, which didn't come to fruition. I suppose that, though a man of very wide sympathies, he was very much part of his own time. The English ascendancy and Oxford were probably seen as being somewhat posh. I mean, even though he is very unbitter about anything, he would have had a certain degree of resistance to that.

NE: *To what extent did you teach Irish Literature at Queen's?*

PB: Oh, quite a bit I think. I used to do Yeats quite a lot. But I would say that we were quite successful in being non–political, not particularly taking a stance on any of these contentious issues in Ireland. Of course, most of us in the staff were not from Ireland. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing I'm not sure, but it meant that we were outside the Protestant—Catholic or Nationalist—Unionist argument. Still, in most places you don't know whether your students are Catholics or Protestants, but I remember that some of the Catholic students writing their essays would dedicate them "Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam". They were taking a stance, you know. But they all seemed to get on together perfectly well. There wasn't a sense of the Catholics or the Protestants going into a corner of their own. I don't know what Seamus thought about us, but I dare say we might have appeared to him to be very much non–Irish.

3. Interview with Geoffrey Carnall. Edinburgh, 21 February 1996.

NE: *You came to Belfast from England in 1952, as a newly appointed lecturer at the*

English Department, Queen's University, and stayed there until 1960. Could you describe the general atmosphere between the Protestant and Catholic students?

GC: When I was there, people used to say that you could easily tell the Catholic students from the Protestants. But I can honestly say that I could never work it out. It so happened that there were two Catholic men and three Protestant women in my first batch of Honours students, as I subsequently discovered. But at the time, it never crossed my mind, and in my innocence I must have made all sorts of insensitive remarks. And they, at least, didn't seem to react in any way. I would say that you had to raise highly controversal issues to see how people reacted, and then you'd know. And I think that there was a very strong feeling that "this kind of sectarianism is a thing we need to grow out of". I mean, on social occasions people would sing Orange and Green songs alternately. There was one particular incident that I remember clearly, which took place in 1958 or 1959. One Saturday I was having lunch in the Students' Union, and I think people were sitting in their respective denominational groupings. For some reason, one table began singing 'The Sash My Father Wore'. Now, one might have expected the Catholics to respond by singing 'A Nation Once Again', but they didn't. The whole place seemed to surge up singing 'I Ain't Gonna Study War No More' — everybody joined in! It was all very jokey, there was no sense of tension.

NE: *So the whole sectarian issue wasn't something that you felt affected the social life at the university in any serious way?*

GC: No, it was very much an outside thing. But of course, that would have changed after the Troubles started.

NE: *You taught primarily nineteenth–century literature?*

GC: Well, I did lots of things. But Laurence Lerner mainly taught the twentieth–century stuff, and I was more into the eighteenth– and nineteenth–century literature.

NE: *What kind of texts would you include in your seminars?*

GC: The usual sort of thing. I did teach twentieth–century novels, though. You know,

Forster, Lawrence, and Graham Greene: a good author to teach there, though he was a highly irregular Catholic. For the same reason, I used to plug John Henry Newman, as a very enlightened Catholic, for the sake of the Catholic students — and also to make the Protestant students realise that some Catholic authors were really rather good.

NE: *How about Joyce?*

GC: Well, I think Joyce would have been around, but it would have been Larry [Lerner] who covered him, because he measures in so well with T. S. Eliot.

NE: *You left in 1960. Could you say something about the ways in which the Department changed during your tenure?*

GC: When I arrived, the department was headed by Professor Baxter, an Oxford man who tried to preserve as much as he could of the Oxford syllabus, which ends around 1830, with a strong emphasis on Old and Middle English. But in 1958 there was put a huge effort into making the syllabus much more like what most universities had around that time. And that was not least thanks to Professor Terence Spencer. But there always was quite a lot of scope for the individual lecturer to put his own stamp on the courses. If you look at the calendars, you'll see that the courses were typically called something like: "Some writers and some writings of the eighteenth century", and then it was entirely up to me, or whoever, to decide what we wanted to teach. [...] And in fact, there was quite a bit of Irish literature being taught. For obvious reasons, there was a strong emphasis on Yeats, and then I used to teach Shaw, Burke, and Sean O'Casey quite a bit.

NE: *So was that being taught* as *Irish literature, or was it...*

GC: No, it was all subsumed, and treated as part of the English canon. There wasn't a separate Irish literature section. Of course, we always used to say that some of the best writers in English were Irish. And especially in terms of playwrights, that seems very much to be true!

4. Interview with Philip Hobsbaum. Glasgow, 12 December 1995.

(Our discussion begins with a general talk about Seamus Heaney's early influences)

PH: What do you take his early influences to be?

NE: *Well, there's Patrick Kavanagh...*

PH: Yes, but apart from Kavanagh, his very early influences which I think persist were Hardy, Frost and Hopkins. Not so much Yeats, I think, which is interesting for a young Irish poet. I'm sure you're right about Kavanagh, but I would say Hardy, Frost and Hopkins, and they're very English, even Frost: I mean, he couldn't get published in America. His first book was published in England.

NE: *Yes...When you started teaching at Queen's University, Belfast — obviously, this was just after Heaney had graduated, but still, the academic milieu would have been very much the same — were Hardy and Frost part of the curriculum at the English Department?*

PH: Yes. In other words, I don't see any rebellion in Heaney. A broadening, perhaps. But I also taught Kavanagh — I greatly admire Kavanagh — and I had a dublicated sheet made of 'The Great Hunger', which in those days was very hard to come by, because it had been banned in the Republic. And this used to cause great arguments. For example, there is a line in 'The Great Hunger' about Maguire's mother, "tall hard as a Protestant spire", and this caused an outbreak in my seminar. You know, "Why a *Protestant* spire?" There were those really strange, quasi–religous discussions that the seminars at Queen's used to fall into, if you didn't look out for them. But I was teaching Kavanagh. I mean, we were given much of a carte blanche as teachers at Queen's, there wasn't any kind of grid imposed on us. And since I believed then, and believe now, that Kavanagh was one of the most important modern poets, he was someone I taught.

NE: *So it was more or less up to you as lecturers to choose which texts to include in your classes?*

PH: Well, it was partly student–led. Let me see, what was going on in those days... *The Catcher in the Rye* was very much in the air. I found myself teaching various things I didn't altogether approve of, because the students wanted it. But you have to make a sharp differentiation between the General courses and the Honours courses. The General

courses had set books, the Honours courses did not. [...] I was associated with modern literature, so clearly I had seminars in that area. But within that area, I could choose a great deal of what I wanted to do. In fact, it was probably more free than now. [...] At Queen's I succeeded a man called Laurence Lerner. Lerner was a poet and a critic, and I think they were trying to get someone rather in Lerner's mould. And when I left Queen's in 1966, Heaney got my job, so there's a kind of continuity there.

NE: *When you came to Belfast in 1962, did you detect a literary scene?*

PH: Yes, among the older men, not the younger people. The older writers I got to know through the BBC mostly, such as Roy McFadden, John Boyd, and Sam Hanna Bell. Now those were three names, and they were then all in their fifties, late forties possibly, and they had actually run magazines. There was one called *Rann*, and another called *Threshold*. Now *Threshold* was dying, it was just on its last legs when I was there. *Rann* was finished some time before. So insofar as people thought about Northern Ireland writing, it was the older people, not the younger ones. What stimulated things a great deal was the Queen's Festival, which was started by a chap whose name I can't recall. But it was really turned into a big affair by a man called Michael Emerson. Emerson was a born entrepreneur, and I think he stirred up things a great deal, probably quite as much as the Group did. No, I think what the youngsters were talking about was mostly American literature. So I managed to talk the university into donating two thousand pounds, which was a collosal sum in 1963, to buy American books for the library, which had hardly any American books. Lots of bizarre things happened. For example, the entire works of William Faulkner were on the shelves one day, and all of them were stolen the next day. Later I found them in the Smithfield market!

NE: *In his essay called 'Belfast', Heaney said about that time: "We stood or hung or sleepwalked between notions of writing that we had gleaned from English courses and the living reality of writers from our own place whom we did not know, in person or in print." And in 1963 he wrote a review of* A Group Anthology, *in which he said, referring to the London Group: "I should like to see similar enterprises started up and down the country and in the universities." When you instigated the Belfast group, was it partly in response to the way in which literature was being taught at the English Department?*

PH: It has always seemed to me illogical that we don't teach creative writing in the universities. We teach criticism. I'm very fond of criticism, and I like writing it. But it's not all there is. We are, as it were, specialising in one branch of writing called Literary Criticism, and we take no notice of what other branches there are. So throughout my career, I've tried to stimulate creative writing officially. Still, my best result have been achieved *unofficially*, because there's nothing to stop you if you start a voluntary group, and get people to come to it.

NE: *That's what you've written about in 'English and Creative Writing' [in* Channels of Communication*], isn't it, where you diagnose a general gap between the disciplines of reading and writing literature in the universities?*

PH: Yes. Well, it's historical, because English was developed to replace Latin and Greek. But many of the analogies don't really work. In the traditional teaching of Latin and Greek, students were encouraged to write Latin verse and Greek verse. More than that, they were encouraged to translate from the Greek and Roman Classics. And some teachers, some, encouraged them to translate into English verse. It's no accident that poets of the stature of Milton and Marvell and Dryden were absolutely first rate Classicists. Now, I wish they'd taken that bit over into English Studies, but they haven't. And of course, we've consistently appointed people only by accident for their creative writing. There's quite a number of academics who are poets or novelists, but that's not why they were appointed. They've enshrined this notion of literary criticism, or literary scholarship, and then separated it from its roots, which is why there's such a preposterous amount of bad criticism around. And then, all the best criticism is written by poets like Seamus Heaney. I think he's an immensely good critic.

NE: *When you started the group in Belfast, was there some kind of link between the English Department and the Group itself? Were there university students attending?*

PH: Yes, not from the English Department *per se*, but from the university. For example, we always ran the group during the university terms, even though I should say that the majority of people in the Group were not from the university. But there were students of mine. But also, there were people I'd just heard about. For example, a new young lecturer at my department was Edna Longley, and she was married to Michael Longley, whose

poems I'd read in magazines like *Poetry Ireland* and *Icaros*. And so I got him into the Group as well, via Edna Longley. Stewart Parker was a research student of mine. So it was just [a question of] using one's contacts.

NE: *How did you come across Heaney? He had published only a few poems at the time.*

PH: Well, I was looking. I spent 1962 to 1963 not running a group, but planning to run one. I wanted to look around me and try to understand the environment, not just at Queen's, but in Belfast itself. Northern Ireland was a very complicated milieu, as you know. I found a poem, which was anonymous, written by someone calling himself 'Incertus', in a little magazine published by the English Department. It showed very clear influences of Hopkins, and I inquired about this. I think it was a chap called Alan Gabbey from the Philosophy Department who told me that it was by a man called Seamus Heaney. I looked around, and I found lots of other Heaney poems in little magazines, so I wrote to him. But I'd written to a number of people, or talked to them, and when the Group started up in November 1963, Heaney came, and also Stewart Parker. And I would say that those were the two stars of the Group at its inception. Longley started attending the next year, when he came to live in Belfast. You see, an important part of running these things, and I've run three or four groups in my time, is who you meet and hear about. Some people won't come along, it doesn't suit everone.

NE: *Derek Mahon attended only once or tw...*

PH: Nonono, this is often, this is, now here's a nonsense. I knew Derek Mahon very well. But as I said, we ran the Group during term. Now, Derek was in Canada in the beginning, and couldn't come along. And then he was in East Anglia as a resident poet. Altogether, he was usually out of Belfast when the meetings took place. I think he came along to two different meetings, but there was never a groupsheet, he never did a reading. But I knew Derek: I'd see him in the vacation, see him out of term, as it were. So there was no kind of hostility. I mean, he was of a very volcanic temperament. But that was the real reason: it was a matter of who was around. On the whole I threw the net pretty wide.

NE: *Was there a guy called John Harvey, who later became Head of the English Department after Peter Butter?*

PH: Yes. That's right. Now, that was a very interesting case, because he was an older person. John had had a couple of books published by the Fortune Press in the 1940s, and then he heard about the Group. He asked me if he could come along, because he said he felt he would like to start writing verse again. And he did indeed! He really started up, you know, and we had a couple of sheets from John. Then I left Belfast, and John had a heart attack and died. This was extremely sad, he was only 43. And I think he would have gone on. He was a man full of exuberance and enthusiasm.

NE: *What year did he die? He became head of the English Department in 1965.*

PH: That's right. And that was the time that he was with the Group. Let me see, I think he must have died four years after he'd been appointed, in 1969. Very great loss, he was a very intelligent man, full of enthusiasm. And a tremendous Wordsworthian: he knew every line of Wordsworth.

NE: *How was his own writing?*

PH: Very Audenesque. Very polished. Academic life can be quite an enemy of one's creative skills, and I think a lot of administration as well as all the teaching had rather drained John Harvey. He was a co–editor of the magazine *Essays in Criticism*, and he was a non–stop worker, a workaholic.

NE: *Heaney has said that you "contributed to [our] crucial transformation from being craven provincials to genuine parochials" ['Belfast']. I know that the Group shouldn't be seen as a movement with a collective artistic manifesto. But I'd like to ask if, in the course of your sessions, you discussed the need to find a voice that would accommodate, through idiom or dialect for instance, the Northern Irish experience?*

PH: We never theorised at large like that. We always spoke specifically about particular texts. But I might say to someone: "I think that's a bit bland, that's a bit generalised, I don't hear a voice here." But I do believe that everyone should go back to their roots, not necessarily to write about their roots, but to find out who they are. One of Heaney's great strengths was that, in this regard, he had no problem. He came with a very clear–cut

background, and didn't have to find out who he was. Of course, he diagnosed this wonderfully in his early poem, 'Digging': as his ancestors dug with a spade, he digs with a pen.

NE: *This was also a crucial stage for Heaney, artistically speaking. He has often talked about his time at Queen's, where he studied , among other things, T. S. Eliot. And what intrigued him about Eliot was that notion of the auditory imagination, although the poetry itself was rather foreign to him. But then he quickly latched on the works of exemplars like Kavanagh and Hopkins, whose poetry he could respond to with much more immediacy.*

PH: Well, Hopkins he knew at school. I think he knew Hopkins, Frost and Hardy very early, probably earlier than Kavanagh. You have to realise, you couldn't get hold of a volume of Kavanagh's poems in 1962. I mean, it was a great blessing [...] when his *Collected Poems* came out in 1965.

NE: *Yes, but I think Michael MacLaverty, who was the headmaster at St. Thomas Intermediate School, where Heaney was teaching at the time, lent him a copy of* A Soul for Sale, *and that must have been around 1962–63. And apparently, Heaney had also come across 'The Great Hunger'.*

PH: Excellent. Yes, he might have had a copy of *A Soul for Sale*, but you see, 'The Great Hunger' had been banned in 1942. And you know why it was banned? because of the old farmer Maguire masturbating over the dying embers. That´s what did it. I remember going to see *Stephen D.*, the play adapted from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by Hugh Leonard. I went to see that with Seamus, and we went to the bar in the first interval, where he ordered three whiskies. I said, "Who's coming with us?" And he said, "I need two for myself". It was after the Hell Sermon. I asked, "Did you ever hear a sermon like that?" He said, "No, it was a cento, a cento of all the sermons we heard in retreats, and they were all about masturbation! It was the hard part of masturbation. During one of these sessions, a boy fainted. We were told: "Your brain cells trickle down your spine, and come out the other end."" I don't know how orthodox a Catholic Heaney is now, but he was very damned orthodox when I knew him. Before his first son, Michael, was born, he used to go Mass and pray.

NE: *How strong was the religious element at Queen's University?*

PH: Well, I had no idea of the enormity of what I was doing. I'd been looking around in the province for a year, but even then I was a stranger. I didn't realise how difficult it was. People said to me: "You'll never get Catholics and Protestants under the same roof to discuss poetry or anything else." Heaney didn't really know any Protestants. He shared a flat with a Catholic boy, and I don't think he mixed much with Protestants, until he met these people in my home. And certainly, a lot of the Protestants had never met a Catholic socially.

NE: *So did you see the same sort of segregation at Queen's?*

PH: Well, Queen's itself was very, very liberal. I mean, each side talked about discrimination. Some said Queen's was very Protestant, some said it was favouring Catholics. I got told off by a bunch of extreme Protestants one year. They said, "You're turning Queen's into a hot–bed of Romanism. There were three Firsts in English this year, and every one went to a Pape." Well, they were right! One of those Catholics who got a First was George Watson, who's now a Professor in Aberdeen.

While we're at it, Heaney told me that Matthew MacDiarmid was more use to him than any other lecturer in Queen's. MacDiarmid had this kind of brain, I mean, he was a man who never stopped thinking. It was he who made *The Wallace* by Blind Harry into a live and current poem. MacDiarmid's main speciality was medieval Scottish Literature, but he was interested in everything. His mind went everywhere, and Heaney found him a very lively teacher.

5. Interview with Louis James. Canterbury, 7 October 1997.

NE: *When was it that you moved to the Caribbean?*

LJ: I was there in three years, between 1961 and 1964.

NE: *How did that come about?*

LJ: I got a job teaching at the English Department. It had been advertised over here, you

know, one of these Commonwealth teaching lectureships. It was a very exciting time when a lot of the future academics, such as Jean daCosta and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, were beginning to teach. John Hearne was also there. But the teaching at the English Department was actually very conventional. At that time, it was still based on the London Certificate of teaching. There was no teaching of Caribbean literature, and there weren't many West Indian academics teaching. Most of them were English.

NE: *Could you say something about the intellectual climate in general?*

LJ: There was certainly quite a lot of nationalism around at the time, though not in the English Department, which tended to be rather conservative, certainly politically speaking. Brathwaite was at the History Department, of course. John Figueroa was also very active, but he was with the Education Department. But I got a sense that the people studying English were on the whole very interested in the English tradition. There was still a lot of people going to either McGill in Canada, or to England. And when I came back to England and got involved in the Caribbean Artists' Movement, there was a general feeling that the real centre [for Caribbean arts] was going to be in London.

NE: *How was the Caribbean Artists' Movement established?*

LJ: Well there's a very good book about it, written by Anne Walmesley. Basically, Kamau Brathwaite came to London thinking there was going to be a tremendous West Indian arts movement in London, but he found there was very little. All these writers were there, Naipaul, Wilson Harris, John Hearne, and [Andrew] Salkey, but they weren't trying to get anything together. So Kamau Brathwaite met up with Salkey, a Jamaican who was free–lancing for the BBC, and John LaRose, and the three of them started it — I think in the Christmas of 1967. They began having meetings, at first at people's houses, but later in the West Indian Students' Centre, which was very political. Of course, it was a time when the ideas of Fanon and Stokely Carmichael were fashionable, and it was very intense and quite fierce. But the Students' Centre got together artists, musicians and dramatists, and they had a couple of conferences at the University of Kent, which were very successful.

NE: *Did you experience that there was any scepticism among the West Indians at home*

towards the Caribbean Artists' Movement?

LJ: Yes. When Brathwaite went back to the Caribbean, he found there was quite a lot of scepticism. People like Mervyn Morris, Dennis Scott, Ruben Moi, Edward Hill, Trevor Ronant and Walcott were involved in a theatre movement, so there was a lot going on in the Caribbean at the same time. I think the two go side by side, really, and I think there was an interaction. But one of the biggest events was in 1970, when the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language met in Jamaica. [On that occasion] everybody was saying, "Let's hope a lot of Commonwealth literature will come out of Jamaica", and Brathwaite really went in and sabotaged the whole thing. He said that it was appalling that this colonialist thinker — meaning Naipaul — was on the platform, so as to swing the whole thing towards a West Indian dialogue. It was very distressing for a lot of people, but I also think very creative.[...]

But the Caribbean was for writers very claustrophobic. I mean, you had people like Eric Roach committing suicide, and you got very isolated. When I was there, the attacks made on people like Naipaul, and Walcott too, claims that they were selling out, were very uncomfortable. It was a very small world. Writing criticism was very hard, because everyone knew everybody else, and there were constantly vicious attacks made. If you went to London, you suddenly got this wonderful big audience. But the most important thing was the 'Caribbean Voices' programme, although it's often been said that this was just another form of colonialism. But not only did it provide a platform for Caribbean writing: one of the most important things was that it was actually based on the spoken word. Language was at the centre of all this, you see. The material submitted to the programmes would be read on air by West Indians, and that's what made it immediately accessible

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NE: *While you were in the Caribbean, did you get a sense of what people actually read. I mean, did West Indians interested in literature have ready access to their own writers?*

LJ: Well, generally the West Indians didn't care much about it. If they did read novels by West Indian authors, they'd typically be reading something like Mittelhölzer's sensational romances. On the whole, they would read European rather than Caribbean literature. All West Indian books available tended to be rather expensive, and I think their great readership was in fact in Europe, rather than in the West Indies. I remember going to a

library in Jamaica, looking at the shelves for Wilson Harris, and all his novels were there, but none of them had ever been taken out!

NE: *So you didn't feel that the fact that the University of the West Indies had been up and running for 10–15 years had contributed to a new generation of more avid readers in the Caribbean?*

LJ: Oh yes, definitely. I mean, the curriculum at the English Department was still very much English–based — there was no Caribbean literature on it. But the students were often interested in the West Indian scene. Generally, though, I got the impression that art and drama were more flourishing in the West Indies than literature.

NE: *In the late 1960s, you edited what seems to have been the first study of Caribbean literature.*

LJ: I felt very diffident about writing *Islands in Between*. When I was asked to do a book on West Indian writing, I got very nervous about usurping the scene, so I asked for advice. And quite often, the advice I got from within the Caribbean turned out to be wrong. The book itself was delayed for about three or four years, so it was well out of date by the time it got published. And while there was a growing interest in getting something published on Caribbean writing, my book was primarily aimed at a European readership. I think it was basically seen as part of this new Commonwealth thing.

NE: *How about the local critics' reception of the new writings coming out of the Caribbean?*

LJ: One of the most vocal critics was Bill Carr. He was a Leavisite, and very scathing about the standard of the work being produced. Yes, it was all very odd. For instance, Brathwaite published some Rastafarian poems in *Savacou*, and was violently attacked, particularly by West Indian writers like Eric Roach, who objected to this clap–trap, this populist stuff. I think at the time, there was a great inability to accept even West Indian popular forms of language. And I think after that, it swung to the other extreme, and Walcott got squeezed in the middle. As you know, he had already experimented with dialect in 'The Tales of the Islands', so he wasn't at all hostile to it. But I think Walcott

survived the way he did because he had his drama, and when he got upset about the attitudes to poetry, and about being isolated, he went down with the boys and did another play.

NE: *All of this seems to reflect a culture that's been conditioned by what Walcott has called "a sound colonial education", doesn't it?*

LJ: Oh yes! For instance, a key figure in Jamaica was Louise Bennett. All the children in school loved Louise Bennett and used to recite her in the 1940s and 1950s, but no one could accept it as literature, even when I was there in the 1960s. There was just this very strange glass wall between what [the West Indians] enjoyed as being entertainment, and what they accepted as literature. The society was so polarised, and people had almost two identities. Still, [the university students] were quite sophisticated in the sense that they had a greater sense of style, when compared to the students I have taught over here. They had a great sense of tradition. A lot of the attitudes towards, and interests in, literature were based on a kind of Victorian concept of literature as a high form, which had gone out in England but was still preserved in the Caribbean. I remember having a very stern debate with my students in Jamaica. I'd just read the Aldous Huxley article on Wordsworth in the Tropics, which says that you cannot really read Wordsworth in the Tropics, and I remember saying, "Of course you cannot read him in the tropics, because it is based on this benign European idea of nature". And they were furious. They said, "Of course we can understand it", and they really did. I mean, they were interested, and the secondary schooling was very good, and probably way above the average teaching over here. At the same time, because being played off against the other major languages, it was sharpened in a sense. And also, there were very few people who actually got so far as to the university, so those who got that far were pretty involved with literature and language. I cannot think of any instance of encountering the same problem I have had over here with trying to get people interested in literature.

6. Interview with Les Murray. Oxford, 8 April 1997.

NE: *I'd like to begin by asking you to comment on what you have described as the Pre–Academic Era in Australian poetry.*

LM: There was a time — up until the 1960s — when poetry in Australia ran its own

industry. Some people claimed that it was a bit cliquish and exclusive, I think in many cases for good reasons. But it also had the most talent. There was a great galaxy of pretty good poets that came up around the 1930s and the 1940s. A lot of people started publishing during and at the end of the Second World War, and continued into the 1960s. The universities of Leningrad and Toulouse were the only ones in the world that I know of that taught Australian Literature. But that was for Communist reasons, so they had a fairly selective view. Not to say that they were entirely wrong, it's just that they left a lot of the evidence out. They were interested in a proletarian tradition, which certainly does exist. And, of course, back then we were still completely in the English Empire mindset, and there was no way in the world that the British would learn to live with Australian poetry.

NE: *Yes, even the Australian scholars were looking towards English literature as a mother tradition, when they started talking about getting Australian literature into the universities.*

LM: Not only as a mother tradition, but as a home. They sought to legitimise it, you had to have the mother country's stamp of approval. And the poets themselves had gotten well and truly beyond that, or had sublimated it in different forms. I mean, Jim McAuley didn't worship the Queen, he worshipped the literature of the eighteenth century. But when the universities finally did take up Australian poetry, we thought that they would be our patrons, that they'd look after us. But the prizes were very high and the rewards ambiguous and meagre. That's what happened. At the same time as Australian poetry was taken up by the universities, the Vietnam War came, the generation of protest and all that. Suddenly there was a political test on your reception by the universities. Gradually, most of the English departments were taken over by one particular kind of poetry which called itself left–wing, using a sort of Marxist jargon, but often without believing it or acting upon it. You *must* defy them, I think, particularly if they're well–educated, because their intention is to take the power out of poetry and transfer it to the universities. So I have been in a curious kind of uncomfortable warfare with a lot of the academia ever since, partly made more painful by being a war against friends. I mean, there are people in the universities that I like. [...] The universities did us one great service — not the universities in Australia, but the ones in Europe — by getting us out of being cramped in the colonial distance and into a wider readership. They took our works world–wide by creating studies in Commonwealth literature. That made all the difference, because the

publishing trade and the political trade followed them. The publishing trade hasn't completely followed, but it has to a degree. What I regret about publishing are two main things. You still can't get published anywhere, and then be distributed in the whole English–speaking world. If you're published in Australia, I think in a sensible world you should be able to sell that book from Jamaica to Zanzibar and the capitals. You can't sell a book in Britain, unless it's published by a respectable British firm. The bookshops just won't order it. And you can't distribute in America, unless you're published by a respectable American firm. So there's still a monopoly operating. The other problem is the lack of lateral distribution. I mean, all of the old ex–colonies are interested in distributing their books back in Britain, the old metropol. But they don't think enough about distributing in each others' countries.

Getting out of the Empire mindset was desperately needed, though. I think it was the black people who got us out of that, I mean, the African people, because once they began to be studied at European universities, the rest of us couldn't be left out: it was too artificial and condescending. Anyway, the war with academia is essentially over now.

NE: *But there was also another change taking place in Australia during the 1960s, because once the universities began taking in Australian poetry, there was also a growing interest in what was going on on the American literary scene.*

LM: Yes, the battle in Australian universities was between the British model and the Californian model.

NE: *Were those some of the changes that you noticed while you were a student?*

LM: Well, I went before this ferment happened. I was [at Sydney University] from 1957 to 1960, and then I was kind of in the university underground, hanging around the place during [...] a fairly major nervous breakdown, from about 1959 to 1962. I just hung around and lived rough in the bohemian style.

NE: *Was there a difference between the literary interests of this underground environment, and those being nurtured at the university?*

LM: There was no interest being nurtured at the university. At least, there was no interest

that we were aware of. We never heard that people were trying to get Australian literature up as a subject, because the academics never communicated with the students in those days, especially not in the English Department. And the first main continuance between academics and the students was managed by a thing we called the Push, which was a kind of Australian Bohemia. Well, it was a descendant of older Australian Bohemias, but more intellectually rigorous.

NE: *It was also around this time that you set out, in your own words, to 'read' the Fisher Library. I was wondering, when did you start to open your eyes to what you've later called a Boeotian tradition? When did you discover, for instance, Welsh or Gaelic poetry?*

LM: You know what I did at university? When I was there, I tended to regard all writers set on the course as belonging to the enemy. I have still never read Shelley because he was the enemy's right arm. So I went for everything marginal in the world, and reading everything else left me with an enormously larger curriculum in my head.

NE: *So Gaelic was something you taught yourself?*

LM: I taught myself its career: I read Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and everything else in Gaelic that they had in Sydney University, and talked about the need for Australia to recognise it, because so many of our settlers had been Gaelic speakers. Eventually, this led to the creation of the School of Celtic Studies at the university. But the trouble is my timing was off, there wasn't anything there when I wanted to go and learn these languages. And by the time it got set up, I was going home to the bush, and I never got to use it.

NE: *Carmichael's* Carmina Gadelica *must have presented you with a great example of the sort of 'folk scholarship' that you seem to have championed as a self–proclaimed "Peasant Mandarin".*

LM: Yeah, in fact, that was were I got the idea of the "Peasant Mandarin".

NE: *When you were developing a sense of an alternative, more wide–ranging curriculum, you were also looking towards American literature, but I guess you were looking at other*

poets than those who were becoming fashionable among your contemporaries?

LM: Yes, I suppose I was in opposition against the old managements of the world, and that's where I learned to be in opposition against the new ones. But I read a lot of the American poets. Robinson Jeffers was the first one I engaged with, though people didn't read him much, not even then, because he was a bit beyond the pale. He tended to hate the human race, in fact he genuinely hated the human species! And I tought, any man who's as mad as that has got some value. But he did tend to think that a reduction of the human race by nuclear warfare would be a good thing. But there were many others. Jim Dickey was one. American critical prose is notoriously slippery, and I remember him being praised by Robert Bly. And then, when Dickey came out for the American involvement in Vietnam, and against the societies in American literature, he was attacked by Robert Bly, using more or less the same words [as before]. I thought, this language is more interchangeable than my stomach can bear. But he was kind of driven out of American literature.

But that school was imported by Australia. I once said, America couldn't win in Vietnam, but she conquered us instead — she conquered us with her left hand! All the worst tendencies of American self–righteousness, moralism and puritanism were taken up by Australia, and I can't see it going away. It made us so that we can no longer see what Australia really is.

NE: *During the 1960s, you were included in a number of anthologies that sought to define some of the new trends in Australian poetry, trends that to some degree also pointed towards the growing American influence. Were you aware of that at the time, and how did you feel about it?*

LM: I was being recruited, I suppose, in a loose, sloppy kind of way, but as I began to become critical, it changed, I started being left out of them. I have always been one to look around and find what's accepted and fashionable, and not particularly obey it. I always go for the marginal and unfashionable. The only question I instinctively ask is, "What's being left out of the picture, who is being snubbed?" Often without particularly disliking the picture. The only thing I dislike quite often is that they're leaving people out and pretending they're not.

NE: *So in the light of all that, how would you assess the long–term development of Australian Literature as a university subject? How has it been treated over the years?*

LM: I'm not sure it's a complete account. I think it's leaving out so much of the evidence that it's really not an honest field to manoeuvre in. There are too many prescribed names. I think somebody will denounce it, it will become unsustainable.

NE: *Ultimately, I guess, what you'd like to see is a curriculum that doesn't divide the various literatures in English into these sub–categories.*

LM: Yeah. We needed a national literature just to break out of the great English mindset. Now we need a national literature rather less, although there are some people who can only operate on that level, while others can operate on a wider level. But then, it should be there and not condescended to.

NE: *In terms of your own poetry, do you feel now, looking back, that you had to go through a phase where you had to focus on and cultivate an Australian voice?*

LM: Yeah, well I don't feel I had to cultivate it. It was something that moved in my subconscious. But I had to arrange a space to exist, in which I could use the language I grew up speaking, and my own references and my own kind of background.

NE: *But in terms of writing poetry, did you initially feel it was difficult to get that language into the medium?*

LM: No, I must have had the courage to use the language that I knew. I had to legitimise a whole lot of things, gradually discovering myself to be religious. And it so happened that the bush was fashionable a couple of generations before my time, and down to just before my time. And then it became deeply unfashionable. The demand was that Australia now be sophisticated, urban, Westernised — fairly indistinguishable from everywhere else. It shouldn't go on and on about the Outback and all this stuff. So my timing was off by about a generation. I came from the country and had this unfortunate liking for defending relegated people. I think you gotta do it, you have to sustain balances. But what gave me a big surprise was that the stuff I was writing, which was utterly "parochial" and

"provincial", and every other word they have used since Athens, was widely acceptable beyond Australia. I thought, "I know what I'm singing, but what are they hearing!"

NE: *It was fairly early that you came over here the first time, in 1965, representing Australia at a Commonwealth Literary Festival...*

LM: Yeah, I don't think I was particularly heard at that occasion. Even the English weren't. The only people that got heard was one group of dissenters from the regular canon. I thought what was happening was that I was watching a parallel Palace Revolution. I watched it with a certain amount of amusement. Those were the years the enemy's canon self–destructed, with lightning. You know, they had put too much powder in it, and it was blowing up, not through the muzzle, but out of the sides of the British.

7. Interview with George Watson. Aberdeen, 16 February 1996.

NE: *You arrived in Belfast to study English at Queen's University in 1960. What was it like for you as a Catholic, coming from a markedly sectarian area like Portadown?*

GW: First of all, there was that general feeling of excitement, coming to a big city like Belfast — compared to Portadown, at least, it was a big city. And I think there was a positive sense of having moved, in some sense, outside sectarian boundaries. So it was very liberating. And the sense of Queen's University as a place of genuine non–sectarianism was quite striking. I felt that it was very much a place where old antagonisms were dying out. There was another thing about it, too. Seamus had been around a couple of years before me — he graduated in 1961, and I only arrived in 1960. But we were among the first generation of Catholics to receive the benefits of the university education system. And what really struck me during my freshers' week was the discovery that a lot of these students' clubs and societies were staffed and presided over by Catholics. It was connected entirely to that feeling of "now's our chance, at last we're out, here we go". It wasn't triumphant in any way, but it produced a general sense of great confidence among the Catholic students. There was a tremendous sense of energised activity among us all. And most of the Protestant students quite welcomed it. Really, there was little animosity. If there were any antagonisms, I didn't notice it. What you did feel was that things were changing, and changing for the better. Still, I also have to admit that when I think about the [student] life at Queen's, the friends that I spent four years with,

quite a few number of the close ones would have been Catholics. But on the other hand, I did a have a couple of good friends who were Protestants: Stewart Parker, for instance, who also knew Heaney well. [...]

NE: *I guess there was also a general exhileration among the Catholic students, just from having gained access to the academic life of the university?*

GW: That's right. In fact, I met Heaney recently, just after I had reviewed *The Redress of Poetry*, and we started to talk about how energising it was for us Catholic students to encounter the plays of Christopher Marlowe, for instance. As Heaney also notes in his Oxford lectures, you'd feel slightly guilty about enjoying it, but you *enjoyed* it. The general response was: "to hell with political correctness, this is good stuff!", and you had a license to read it because you were studying English Literature, and you had a license to write about it enthusiastically. And I had this terrific teacher of Jacobean drama, Gamini Salgado, who came from Sri Lanka, was very dark, and spoke with a perceptible accent. And this was even the more amusing, that here was this colonial, even more disadvantaged than we were, teaching Marlowe with great enthusiasm. The other great teacher at the English Department was Laurence Lerner, who came from South Africa. Lerner had this most insinuating voice, and we knew that he was an atheist, which was of course even better, because he would teach us Milton! He was wonderfully provocative. But the liberating thing about Lerner and Salgado could also be linked to the fact that they were foreign, they were outside that whole conflict of Britain–versus–Ireland. [...]

NE: *Did you have Hobsbaum as a teacher?*

GW: Yes, I had him as an undergraduate, but we didn't like him as a teacher, he wasn't at all our cup of tea. Of course, Seamus had an entirely different experience of him, through the creative writing group. I know it was important for Seamus and others to have a sense that this English outsider was validating the things they were doing... At least, Hobsbaum created a space in which people could come and say: "Actually, I do like poetry!"